cherry pie by brawls (brawlite), ToAStranger

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: Blow Jobs, Breathplay, Child Abuse, Derogatory Language, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, First Time, Fluff and Angst, Frottage, Homophobic Language, M/M, Recreational Drug Use, Summer, Under-negotiated Kink, summer time
Language: English
Characters: Billy Hargrove, Steve Harrington, assorted other characters
Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington
Status: Completed
Published: 2018-05-01
Updated: 2018-07-09
Packaged: 2022-04-22 05:08:48
Rating: Explicit
Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply
Chapters: 2
Words: 133,828
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

Billy Hargrove lives for summer. Endless sunshine, heavily chlorinated pools, roaming ice cream trucks, and unencumbered freedom? There's nothing better.

Even being stuck in Hawkins can't ruin the summer for him. He eats it up, devouring every day whole.

1. Part One

Author's Note:

> WARNINGS: VERY LONG FIC; two parter; angst ahoy; seriously, you've been warned, I've cried; casual weed use; not great ways of handling emotional trauma; Billy's very angry; Billy has a crush; lack of discussion for this one intense sexual encounter; idiots in love.

Billy Hargrove lives for summer. Endless sunshine, heavily chlorinated pools, roaming ice cream trucks, and unencumbered freedom? There's nothing better.

Even being stuck in Hawkins can't ruin the summer for him. He eats it up, devouring every day whole.

His days are packed full of the season, dripping with indulgence and relaxation. Or, well -- they're mostly full of carting Max around, but Billy makes do. It helps that all Max really wants to do these days is go to the local pool and cool off in the water with her friends, which means that Billy can spend hours on the pool deck, sprawled out in a lounger, soaking up the sun. And with a promise of two hundred dollars from his dad at the end of August, Billy's not going to complain *too much*.

Today is much the same. Sunny and hot. Perfect. Billy has been lazing in a chair near the water, sporting a pair of aviators, trying to ignore pretty much everything around him. Max and her friends just started up a game of Marco-Polo, which means it's becoming increasingly *difficult* to tune them out, but by god, Billy is trying.

Other than that, there's not *much* going on by the pool. A few smaller kids are toddling around off to the side, and there's a few kids from his graduating class camped out by the side of the pool, dangling their legs into the water and tittering like a flock of birds.

Billy's trying not to pay much attention to them, either.

Partially because he hates pretty much everyone in this place, and partially because one of those people is Steve Harrington. And Billy *wishes* he could hate the guy, but he doesn't.

Goddamn, he *doesn't*.

It would be a lie if Billy tried to deny the instant, electric attraction he'd felt upon seeing that pretty face for the first time. Not at the party, beer a buzz in his veins, but earlier, in the halls of Hawkins High, keeping to himself until he wasn't anymore -- scooping up that prude little princess of his with a laugh and a smile.

But it had been at the party, too. Hops on his breath, sweat on his chest, Steve Harrington whipping off his sunglasses while Tommy taunted him from Billy's side, like he was sizing Billy up. Scoffing out a laugh and trading a few words with Tommy before slipping away, like he found Billy wanting.

It had been on the court and in the showers and in the halls. It had been in his head, in his *dreams*, that pretty face, those big eyes, that stupid smile.

Hell, it'd been at the Byers' too. On that cold November night, Billy's anger burning his skin so bright he caught flame, and Billy had bloodied up those pretty features, beaten them black and blue and red with knuckles that cracked. Like he couldn't stand having to look, to want, and to not have. Like, maybe, if he messed him up enough, he wouldn't feel this burning, boiling *yearning* in his gut anymore.

That hadn't worked too well.

Harrington's face healed up just fine. So did Billy's knuckles.

Sometimes, though -- sometimes Billy can make out a scar, somewhere around Steve's temple, dragging up into his hairline. That's enough of a reminder not to let his fists go flying again.

It's harder some days than others. After a rough night with his dad on his ass, or a long day of listening to Max bitch.

It's hard now, too. Seeing Steve Harrington lean against the lifeguard

stand after Kelly, the chick in red and home from college for the summer, blows the whistle for the kids to hop out of the pool and give some time for the adults to indulge in a little relief from the heatwave. Seeing him grin down at her, sunglasses pushed up into his hair, making it stick up at all ends, as she rocks up on her toes and pokes at Steve's bare, pinkening shoulder.

He hears her laugh, even from where Billy's laid out and soaking up the bliss of the sun, at whatever Steve has just said to her.

His only relief comes when that curly haired dweeb, Dustin, pads up to Steve, flippers and snorkle and all -- as if he might find something in the bottom of the pool-- and demands a quarter to buy something from the popsicle stand. Steve rolls his eyes, but it's fond, Billy can tell, and gestures over to the empty chairs by Billy, where the kids have piled their things with Max's and Steve has left his backpack full of extra sunscreen and, likely, his wallet.

The thing about toting Max around is, unfortunately, it means seeing Steve *everywhere*. He's always with the kids, like he's some kind of stand-in soccer mom, helicoptering around and herding them like sheep.

Billy still remembers that stilted conversation in April, lingering outside of Palace waiting on the little idiots, blowing smoke just to keep his hands busy as Steve stared at him. Still remembers how he'd sighed, arms crossed, and said: *listen, I don't really like you; you obviously don't like me*-- Billy hadn't tried to correct him -- *but this Cold War bullshit is bullshit. Just try not to be a total dickhead or beat my fucking face in again, and we'll call it a truce*.

Billy remembers eyeing him until Harrington shifted on his feet, like he was about to take it all back, and then offering up a cigarette to seal the deal.

"Yeah. Sorry, or whatever." He'd said. "Truce."

And they'd circled around one another and that truce ever since.

Billy braces himself for Dustin's approach. He can see him coming a mile away, even though he pretends to keep his eyes closed from

behind his sunglasses. He doesn't move at all: a perfect, picture of a lazy nap in the sun, stretched out like a housecat.

"Oh my god," Dustin grumbles, when he approaches. Flopping his way down the pool deck. "Is that even necessary?"

Dustin's probably referring to Billy's short-as-hell swim shorts, bright blue and banana yellow, slung low on his hips. They really show off his tanned skin, Billy thinks. The sweat-glistening muscles, too. All the ladies seem to agree.

"Make it quick," Billy says, nodding to how Dustin's already digging through Steve's bag. "I'd hate to get annoyed enough by you to drop you in the pool."

"Can't," Dustin says, and it's saucy enough that Billy knows he's picked up the tone from Steve. "It's adult swim."

"Then you'd get in trouble," Billy says with a shrug. "How does that make it any *less* appealing for me?"

"Asshole," Dustin huffs, but it's hardly biting, more like a weird petname, as Dustin stops in his rummaging to holler over his shoulder at where Steve had dipped down to say something in Kelly's ear, the prettiest picture of a boy trying to get his dick wet, all lithe muscles on display in the short, garish pink and blue and teal of his swim shorts. "Steve, I can't find it!"

Steve rolls his eyes again, shoulders drooping, and he offers a smile that's supposed to be an apology to Kelly, one Billy's seen work a dozen and a half times on the girls in Hawkins, all soft and sweet and kind, before excusing himself and padding over. His smile drops when he moves past her, and he ends up at the end of the lounger next to Billy's, hands on his hips.

"You can't find it *it's not there*, or you can't find it *you're incapable*?"

Dustin grins. "The latter."

Steve holds out a hand. "Give it."

Steve doesn't have any trouble finding his wallet. Pulls out a five and

tells Dustin to get him a blue one and bring back his change.

Then, Dustin is bounding off, practically tripping over himself to join the rest of the kids in line at the snack stand, leaving Steve and Billy there in the sun.

Billy watches Steve from behind his sunglasses, arms crossed behind his head. It's hard to not let his gaze drift over the lines of Steve's body, to not let his eyes drop to those *stupid* shorts and the dusting of Steve's happy trail disappears beneath eye-searing teal.

"He better be bringing me back one, too," Billy warns. "Or I really am going to toss him into the pool."

Steve snorts, plopping down onto the end of the lounger next to him, elbows on his knees, glancing over his shoulder at Billy before back at the gaggle shouting at the poor kid behind the snack stand. His back and the tops of his shoulders look a little pinker, this close.

There's sweat on his skin, but in all the times they've been here, Steve's only ever stuck his feet in the water. Even on the hottest days.

At a party at the beginning of June, after Steve had toted Dustin and Lucas and Will and Mike to the local swim hole the entire week, Tommy had mentioned Steve having his own pool. Billy had brought it up on the next time Max badgered him enough to take her, and Steve had looked at him with a dry, dry smile.

"And have you and all those little shits running around my place?" His smile had never reached his eyes. "Not likely."

Steve flops back on the lounger now, grin wry and *real*.

"I think he'd actually get a kick out of that," Steve says. "So you might be out of luck."

"Then I'll just take yours," Billy warns.

Thinking about getting his mouth on something Steve's mouth has been on makes him just that bit warmer. He really *could* do with some kind of ice cream.

Billy's eyes go back to Steve, following the way he relaxes on the lounger. And Billy can't help but feel a little hungry.

"You're turning a little pink, King Steve."

Steve slides his sunglasses down to rest on the bridge of his nose, head lulling over. "You offering to get my back?"

Billy wasn't. The thought of dragging cool sunscreen over Steve's sunkissed skin is both alluring and terrifying. He doesn't think he'd be able to take his hands *off* of Steve once he started. But he doesn't think he can say *no*, either. Even if Steve's only offering as a joke.

"Maybe," Billy says. "Only if I'm getting something out of it. You gonna buy me an otter pop?"

Not that Billy needs *any* incentive. But it's not like he's going to say that.

"And a soda, too." Steve says. "I'm too gorgeous to burn."

Billy lets out a laugh. "You wish. Maybe a little color might make you look less washed out, huh? But I guess I could help you out. Got any sunscreen for me? Don't think mine'll work for you."

Billy's sunscreen is practically oil. It wouldn't do much to help Steve's toasting shoulders out.

Steve reaches into his bag again and tosses a bottle at Billy as he sits up. It smells like coconut when Billy catches it, opens it, and it's thick like the good, expensive stuff usually is -- if a little runny from being out in the heat-- but cool as it pools in Billy's palm.

Steve slides from his chair and over to Billy's, sitting near his hip, and he steals the bottle back so he can dab some on his nose and cheeks, sunglasses shoved up into his hair again. Billy can see his shoulders move, muscles rolling; can see the ladder of his ribs too, when he breathes, like he doesn't eat enough. He smells like sweat and sunscreen and coconuts.

"Thanks, man." Steve says, before Billy even moves. "Last time I let one of the kids do it, they drew pictures."

That makes sense. Usually, if Steve thinks he's gotten too red, he'll pull a shirt over his head and deny Billy the sight of all that skin.

Billy swings a leg around, so that he's bracketing Steve in, Steve tucked into the V of his legs -- with the nice excuse of just getting a better angle, if anyone were to ask. He slicks up his hands and then just -- sets them down on Steve's shoulders, unwilling to let hesitation stop him from this indulgence. There's no way of describing Steve's hot skin, slick under his fingers, other than *perfect*. Billy's wanted to get his hands on him for *so long* that this feels absurd, a little bit like a dream.

Under his hands, Steve's muscles flex and relax as Billy's fingers brush over them. Greedy for more touch, more contact.

"How do you know I won't just draw a dick right in the middle of your back?" Billy asks, pulling a fingertip down Steve's spine. Teasing.

"Will you?" Steve asks, tone droll and white smeared over his nose when he glances over his shoulder, but Billy feels something shudder up Steve's back under his touch; his skin practically jumps when he spreads his palm out over the cradle of Steve's lower back.

"Jury's still out," Billy says.

He squeezes more sunscreen into his hand and lets his hands rub it into Steve's skin. His touch is a little hard, fingers working *just a little bit* into muscles that are way too tense, especially along the rocky trail of Steve's spine.

Steve's shoulders bunch when he gets to a spot along the backs of his ribs. He presses a little harder, and Steve slumps a bit, air rushing out of him, groan caught behind his teeth.

It goes straight to Billy's gut.

He *should* pull back. He *should* stop. Instead, he braces one sunscreen-slick hand on Steve's shoulder, and uses his other hand to dig his thumb into the stubborn knot.

"Someone's *tense*," Billy says, keeping his voice light. If he's too

serious, Steve might -- push him away.

“Shut the fuck up,” Steve says, but it's practically a laugh, and his head goes hanging forward as another sound shudders up through him. “Didn't think I was gonna get the *royal* treatment-- *Jesus*, Hargrove, right *there*.”

Billy bites his lip to stifle his own groan. Steve’s words echo in his head, like they’re taken straight from so many of Billy’s dreams: *right there*, *right there, right there*. It makes Billy want to shudder, want to bite down on the meaty flesh of Steve’s shoulder while he’s not looking, even if it means Billy will get a mouth full of sunscreen.

He doesn’t do that, though. Instead, he just presses a little harder, thumb working at that knot.

“Well, you are a King,” Billy says.

He holds Steve a little tighter when he squirms. He doesn't get a reply, no pithy little retort, because Steve is gasping, smacking his hands down on the edge of the lounger and onto Billy’s knee, smearing the sunscreen caught between his fingers there as the knot comes loose.

He shudders, shoulders rolling, and grunts when Billy doesn't relent. Clutches at Billy's knee, his palm hot, his fingers curling, and then smacks at it.

“Easy, easy,” Steve is panting a little, spine curving when Billy finally smoothes his palm over that tender spot. “Jesus.”

The knot has almost dissolved underneath his attentions. It makes Billy feel accomplished. And Steve, with his squirming and his noises, makes Billy feel -- well, it definitely makes Billy feel *something*.

“There,” Billy says, smoothing his hands out over Steve’s shoulders, effectively rubbing in the last of the sunscreen. His eyes flick to the left, to movement near the snack bar. *Shit*. It’s the kids, coming back. They can’t see *this*. Billy flattens his palms on Steve’s spine and *pushes*. “All done.”

Steve stumbles a bit, when he gets to his feet, turns around and opens

his mouth -- but he's cut off before he can even start, Dustin bounding up and shoving two dollars and a blue otter pop at Steve's chest. He scrambles a bit to grab them, face a little flush beyond the heat of the sun, sweat and sunscreen making a few dark hairs cling to his forehead, and Billy can't help but wonder if Steve might look like that after more than just a back massage.

He blinks when Max shoves a cherry red otter pop into his face.

Billy takes it. Snatching it out of her hands, greedy for something to numb his hands. He bites the plastic open, tasting the cool cherry on his tongue.

“You’re *welcome,*” Max says.

Billy just grunts.

With a huff, she sits next to him, her own grape pop clutched in hand. Elbows him over, too.

Before, that kind of shit would've made his blood boil. He didn't want her near him, would've cursed her out for trying-- but Max *knows* him. Probably better than anyone else, especially now, here and stuck in Hawkins like they are, and his fury with her, with everything about her and all that she knows about him, has long since faded.

He elbows her back, instead.

Across from them, Steve is opening up Will’s otter pop for him and passing it back. Biting his own open and skirting away when Dustin tries to press the bright orange of his against Steve's arm.

“Cut that shit out, dipshit.” Steve says, shoving him away with a hand firm on top of his head, but he's laughing again, eyes creased at the corners. “And where the fuck is the rest of my change?”

Max clears her throat at Billy's side, voice low. “You're staring.”

This time, Billy *does* shove her and curse. Shouldering her so she falls sideways a little bit on his lounger. But honestly -- he is a little thankful that she pointed it out. Even if it means he doesn’t get to let

his eyes linger on Steve, anymore.

Billy lets his hand drop down to his own bag, pulls out a couple bills and throws them at Max. “For your troubles, pipsqueak.”

“Thanks, asshat.” She says, but takes the cash and stuffs it into the ratty beach bag she's got resting under his chair.

Billy can’t help but sneak a look at Steve from the corner of his eye, taking shelter from behind his sunglasses. He’s still bickering with Dustin, looking way too endearing as he chews on the top of his bright blue otter pop.

Max smacks him again.

-*-

The heatwave at the end of June cements their fate. It's the pool, pretty much everyday, unless Max and her useless band of idiots decide they want to stay in at Mike's, or go trolling through the forest like they're on some kind of stupid adventure.

It's two weeks of this. Of heat and laying out. Of watching Steve flirt with the lifeguard. Of gritting his teeth a bearing it and the annoying chatter of the kids. Of sometimes, if he's lucky, getting his hands on Steve's back and shoulders, and getting a soda and a smile in thanks.

Not that he actually needs the bribe. His palms itch every damn time Steve gets close. He gets hot when he smells *coconuts*, for fuck’s sake.

Billy is in the water, today. The sun is almost unbearable, but the water is a cool relief.

Steve's in red. The shorts are shorter, tighter, and Billy keeps looking at his thighs. Keeps thinking about sinking his teeth into the soft insides of them. Has hazy, summer hot dreams about it, in the middle of the night, Steve's stifled little groans ringing between his ears.

He's looking up at Kelly today, where she's perched and not doing her job at all, facing the pool. The kids splash him a few times when they go by, and Steve laughs, but he never gets in.

He watches them, though. Big eyes counting heads every once in a while. Billy wonders why that is, what he's so worried about, but he doesn't ask.

They put up with each other. Bark insults more often than words whenever they're around one another. Billy doesn't have a right to ask Steve why he watches the kids like he thinks one of them might disappear.

It's also why he doesn't say anything when he sees Tommy sneak up behind Steve while he's telling Kelly some lame joke. Doesn't warn him as Carol and a few of the guys Tommy-- and sometimes Billy -- hangs out with hide their laughs. Doesn't do anything when Tommy pushes at Steve's back, hard, and shoves him into the pool.

He goes with wide eyes. With a shout and a splash, and hits the water hard.

Tommy’s laughing when Steve sputters to the surface, sunglasses gone. “You looked a little hot, there, Stevie!”

He cackles. His friends do, too.

Billy thinks Steve might curse him out -- he's seen it happen, once or twice, usually only when Jonathan or Nancy are by his side -- or maybe flip Tommy off.

Steve doesn't.

He's pale, hair matted down, kicking in the water. Gasping like he's drowning. His eyes are so wide.

“Steve!” Dustin's voice breaks from somewhere across the pool, and there's a mad frenzy of motion, of water moving as the kids surge into motion, to try and get to him.

Billy gets there first.

He doesn't even know how it happens, how he even *got* there, but suddenly Billy’s right there, arms going around Steve like Billy’s some lifeguard. Like he’s doing Kelly’s job for her.

“Hey,” Billy says, arms tight around Steve as he gets them to shallower water. “*Hey*, you're fine.”

Steve is shaking against him. Sucking in breath like he can't get enough of it. His hands clutch at Billy, blunt nails biting, even when his feet are on the ground.

His eyes are still wide, pupils blown out, cheeks and lips pale.

“Get him out of the water!” One of the kids yell, somewhere behind Billy; he thinks it's Mike.

Kelly's whistle blows.

Billy ignores the whistle and listens to the kids. He picks Steve up like a goddamn bride, scooping him into his arms, and walks him straight out of the pool. He ignores the shouts of everyone behind him, and carries Steve over to his lounger where Billy's towel is spread out. He sets Steve down on the towel and kneels down next to him, knees scraping against rough concrete.

“It's okay. Hey, Steve, *it’s okay.”*

Billy wants to brush the dripping hair out of his face. Instead, he just keeps his tone level. His hand on Steve's wrist.

His teeth are chattering a bit, like he's cold, but his skin is warm under Billy's touch. He stares at Billy for a second, but doesn't seem to see him.

Then, he curls over, groans, and presses his face between his knees.

“Steve,” Dustin gasps, and there's the sound of wet feet on pavement, the chatter of voices asking if Steve's okay, Will shushing them and saying *give him some space, guys*. “Steve, buddy? You okay?”

Steve's shoulders shake.

Billy's hand is on Steve's back before he can stop himself, not quite rubbing, just touching. A comfort, even if it's awkward.

“I got you,” Billy says, voice low. “You're safe.”

Because even though Billy has no idea what the fuck is going on -- it seems like Steve doesn't feel safe. Like he's scared. Billy's seen an anxiety attack before -- this is a hell of a lot like it.

Steve seems to heave a few times, but then settles, rasping between his knees. His shaking settles to a finer tremble, and he reaches out blindly with both hands -- catching Billy's with one, and Dustin's wrist with the other.

He squeezes. Takes a few deeper breaths. Shudders.

"I'm okay," he says, but his voice is a mess.

Billy sits back on his heels, but he doesn't let Steve go. Just lets him breathe. Lets Dustin push a -- candy bar in Steve's face.

"Eat it," Dustin says.

"I'm *fine*," Steve insists, finally picking his head up, nose wrinkling up as he jerks back.

Dustin makes a face, like maybe they've had this argument before. "Steve --"

"Jesus, fuck, *fine."* Steve snatches up the bar, ripping open the wrapper with his teeth and biting into it, gesturing back to the pool with a haphazard wave of his hand. "Go. I'm fine."

Dustin turns his narrowed eyes on Billy. Points a finger and everything.

"Make sure he finishes that whole thing," he says. "We're gonna go plot."

"Plot?" Steve says around a mouthful, and his face is red now, eyes darting over to where Kelly the lifeguard is berating Tommy and his friends, pointing at the exit.

"Plot," Dustin says, and then walks away.

"Well, that's fucking stupid," Billy says after the brats all stalk off.

He watches Steve eat the candy bar, though. Still on his knees.

Steve avoids his gaze, keeps his eyes down, and chews slow. There's still a tremble running through him, every now and then, and his toes curl up over the rough pavement.

“Thanks,” he mutters.

Billy opens his mouth to say something stupid, something joking -- but nothing comes out. Instead, his fingers curl over Steve's just a little bit. Because he doesn't trust himself to talk, to do *anything*. Because this feels important and Billy's never been good with *important*.

When Steve hesitates on the next bite, Billy squeezes his hand. “Eat up, pretty boy.”

Steve snorts and rolls his eyes; Billy shifts his grip, curls his fingers over Steve's wrist; Steve lets him. “I'm not even hungry.”

“Who's gonna pass up free sugar? Don't be an idiot.” Billy thumbs over Steve's pulse, feels it thundering still under his touch. “Besides, if you don't, that dweeb is gonna kill you. And then me. And I'm not about that. So -- eat.”

Steve's eyes finally flit up to him. They dart over his face, then down, quick like he doesn't want to be caught staring even with Billy looking right at him.

His gaze lands somewhere near his knees. Then, carefully, perhaps pointedly, he scoots over on the foot of the lounger, water rolling down from his hair, to his neck and down his back, dripping from the tip of his nose. He shivers.

“I'd prefer a cheeseburger.”

“You're the fucking worst,” Billy says.

He fists the towel trapped under Steve and tugs at it as he clambers off of his own knees. Once he’s freed it from a confused looking Steve, he drapes it over those wet and shaking shoulders.

“Dry yourself off,” Billy says.

Then, he grabs his bag and stalks off to the snack bar, because he's lost control over his life.

When he comes back, burger in hand, Steve is right where Billy left him. Looking like he hasn't moved an inch.

Billy’s towel is big and warm over his shoulders. He looks like he's stopped shaking, at least.

Even if he does look a little lost, sitting there like that.

When he spots the burger, his eyes go wide. “I could *kiss* you.”

Billy falters for a second, like Steve somehow *knows* just how much Billy would like that. But he composes himself and sets the burger down on Steve's knee -- and steals the candy bar, chomping down hungrily.

Steve moans around his first bite. He seems, suddenly, more hungry than he'd let on.

Steve scooches again, making the space next to him available, head bobbing a little as he hums around another bite. “Seriously, this is amazing. The only thing that could be better would be fries.”

“Who knew you were such a needy bitch?” Billy mumbles, feeling stupid because he can't help but kick himself for *not* getting Steve french fries.

For a moment, Billy eyes the space Steve has made on the lounger. It seems kind of absurd to think that Steve might want Billy to sit next to him, but -- Billy does it anyway, plopping down next to Steve like it's no big. Like they're suddenly best fucking friends.

Billy leans back, pawing at the ground underneath the chair to grab his sunglasses, sliding them onto his face once they're in hand. He feels less naked with the on, more protected. Mostly, it's just easier to look at Steve. To watch him chowing down on that hamburger. He's too skinny, Billy thinks. Too thin and too packed full of tension.

He thinks of bringing Steve to the diner, of plying him full of milkshakes and fries and burgers. He thinks of Steve's dopey smile under the neon lights in the window, of his still-damp hair drying as Billy watches it. He thinks -- well, he thinks he's got it *bad*.

“Are you going to give me my towel back, or are you going to hog it all day?” Billy snaps.

Steve glances at him, halfway through chewing, and there's already something a little less fragile about him. Like, *maybe*, Billy's hands and words and care brought him back out of that blind panic and back to something close to normal.

Except Steve looks away again, and his eyes are locked onto where the kids are in the pool. It isn't one of his usual cursory looks. It stays there, like he'd refuse to turn away for longer than a second for anything.

He waits until he's done chewing to reply, swallows, and doesn't shrug out of Billy's towel.

“Sorry, Hargrove.” But he doesn't sound sorry; not even a little. “I'm holding it hostage for a little while longer.”

Billy grumbles but doesn't *really* care. He likes the way his towel looks over Steve's shoulders, likes the way he knows it'll smell like Steve later.

But he does lean to the side, grab some of the towel, and makes a big show of drying his hair off. Bumping Steve many times in the process.

Steve snorts, banging his shoulder into Billy's at least once in retaliation. He leans forward, elbows on his knees, and let's the towel hang over his back, the weight of water pulling it down a bit, his movement knocking it loose from one shoulder when he pushes a hand through his hair to shove it out of his face.

His eyes don't leave the kids, his mouth set into a thin line, burger half eaten in his hands, as if he's forgotten it's there.

He should probably eat, Billy thinks.

Billy, once he's done with his hair, grabs Steve's wrist, brings Steve's hand to his own mouth, and takes a bite of the burger. After all, he bought it with his own money. He holds Steve's eyes from behind the safety of his sunglasses and then lets Steve's hand go.

“Finish your fucking food,” Billy says, with his mouth full.

“Jesus,” Steve sighs and shakes his head, taking another bite. “I didn't realize you were such a damn mother hen. You sit there and make sure Max eats all of her veggies, too?”

“Sure, I'm a regular babysitter,” Billy says, because it's better than saying, *no, I don't give a shit what Max does*, because that's wrong and also implies that he *does* give a shit what Steve does.

Steve snorts again, around another bite. He knocks his shoulder into Billy's, and then slumps a bit, leaving bare skin on bare skin.

“Sure,” he mutters. “You're a regular Jamie Lee Curtis.”

“Yeah,” Billy breathes out, focusing everything on not stiffening up with Steve leaning on him like this. His skin is *warm* and Billy just wants to press against him. Wants to drape that towel over both of them and curl up in the sun.

“So,” Billy says. “What do you think they're plotting?”

“Murder,” Steve says.

Billy snorts. “Me, you think?”

“Nah, you bought Dustin a grape otter pop last week. You're at least temporarily off the list.” Steve says. “Tommy. If Lucas doesn't at least use his wrist rocket on him, I'll be surprised.”

“I bought you a hamburger. I should be off the list for good.” He huffs, leans forward, and teases at his curls with his fingers. “Tommy's a dick.”

“Yeah, well.” Steve shrugs against him, breathing out heavy as he swallows another bite. “You hang out with him, so you're still fair game.”

“He hangs out with me. Get it right, King Steve.”

Steve makes a sound, and then his shoulders shake like he's laughing. “That's true, I guess. Tommy has a way with latching on. Kinda like a leech.”

“Jesus, yeah,” Billy laughs. He doesn't have much time for Tommy but he does like the free booze and the free drugs. Tommy H: always up for a party. “C’mon, you got like two bites left.”

“I'm not gonna die if I don't finish, Hargrove.” Steve says, and finally looks at him, their bodies close, heat between them despite the chill of water clinging to Billy and Steve's skin.

“No, but *I'm* gonna, because those kids are gonna kill me if I don't take care of you, or something.” Billy looks out over the pool, just so he doesn't have to look at Steve. Just so he has another place to look.

“Aw,” Steve says, and Billy can hear the grin in his voice. “You gonna nurse me back to health, Billy?”

Jesus.

Jesus.

It's like Steve Harrington is actually trying to kill him. “Guess it's my calling. *Someone’s* gotta do it. And apparently I'm faster than that damn lifeguard.”

“It was very heroic of you,” Steve says. “If I hadn't been -- well, I would've been impressed if I wasn't so busy trying to breathe.”

“It's okay. You can be impressed now.”

“Alright,” Steve says, and his smile is a curious little thing, his head tilting as he squints in the sun to look at him. “I'm impressed.”

Billy shivers, even though it's sweltering. Steve's look, when Billy catches it, goes straight down his spine.

He turns his head again, watching Max balancing Will on her shoulders, instead.

Steve finishes off his food quietly before shrugging out from under Billy's towel. He pushes to his feet on wobbly legs and drags a hand over his face.

“I think I've had enough excitement for one day,” Steve says. “I'm gonna round up the kids and take ‘em to Mike's. I can take Max, if you want.”

“You gonna cram them all into your car, pretty boy?” Billy grabs his towel. “I could take some, or whatever.”

“Okay,” Steve says, and looks at him again, eyes big and dark and flitting over Billy's face. “Thanks, Billy.”

Billy thinks he means for more than just offering to drag the kids around. Thinks he means something else. But he's not sure.

Steve steps away hollering for the kids before he can ask or think on it too long. Billy watches him as he greets the kids by the pool, a healthy couple of feet away from the edge, and sees him grin when Will holds up a pair of sunglasses they'd fished from the bottom, sees him scrub a hand through the kids wet hair and then loop an arm around him to guide them back to their things.

There isn't a hint of Steve's earlier panic. Just relief and that big smile.

-*-

House parties in Hawkins aren’t as terrible as Billy had dreaded they’d be.

Turns out, boredom is a damn good motivator.

He’s a few beers in, already taking a break from the heat of the house, leaning against some fancy back deck, smoking and watching Tommy H do a keg-stand. The guy’s already fall-down drunk, spending his summer apparently getting smashed out of his mind from the second he rolls out of bed. Billy can’t help but laugh as the guy falls down with a thud a little ways away.

Billy blows out a long breath of smoke toward the sky and lopes over

to where Carol is watching Tommy right himself with a patient smirk. Not helping him at all. Jeez -- the love between these two is *weird*.

Billy slings an arm around her shoulders. “I miss anything good?”

Carol curls into him, batting her lashes, and for much as she's a flirt, giving as good as she gets, Billy knows she's loyal -- almost stupidly so -- to Tommy. “Katie Beck and Jeremy snuck upstairs ten minutes ago. I think they might be back on again.”

Carol is a infinite source of nonsense. The drama, however, is usually pretty entertaining, even if the gossiping crawls under his skin after a while.

“Oh,” Carol blinks her big eyes at him. “And *Steve's* here. I've no idea who invited him -- but he brought liquor and Chris seemed to know him.”

Chris is their esteemed host for the evening's festivities. He's about two years too old to be hanging out with high schoolers, even graduated ones, but apparently he was hot shit back when he went to Hawkins. Star of the football team and the basketball team, built like a brick house, with a guileless smile, bright green eyes, and freckles and red hair to match.

Apparently, he went away to school on scholarship and came back queer. He's stacked enough that people are happy to make fun of him behind his back, but won't say anything to his face, even if word spreads fast in small towns like this.

Billy hasn’t met the guy, other than in passing. He’s attractive enough, but not really Billy’s type. Too small-town.

“Where *is* Harrington?” Billy asks, because he can, because Carol *likes* bitching about him and Billy’s curious. Because he just can’t leave the thought of the guy alone, apparently.

“He's hanging out with our *host*,” she says, pulling away when Tommy comes staggering up, greeting him with a wet kiss.

“Who's hanging out with who?” he asks when he comes up for air,

grinning over at Billy.

“Steve,” Carol curls into his side, laughing when he makes a face. “He's in the kitchen with Chris. *Talking* and hoarding all the good shit.”

“Of course,” Tommy rolls his eyes. “He wouldn't lower himself to drink the stale commoners beer with the rest of us. Did he bring whisky or bourbon?”

“Didn't see.”

“Whatever,” Tommy huffs, glancing at Billy. “Guy can't even fight his own battles anymore, these days. Those dumbasses he's always babysitting nailed me with water balloons this morning and TP’d my house.”

That explains where Max was off to so early.

“What's he doing with *Christopher*?” Tommy mocks with a nasally lisp, batting his lashes and poking at Carol’s side with a laugh. “Pretty sure Steve hates fags.”

Something in Billy’s gut pulls tight at that. Twists, slithering around inside him, cold and terrible. He hasn’t had that much to drink, but a wave of nausea hits him. He takes another drag of the cigarette, trying to quell it. Trying to steady himself.

“Yeah? That’s a real surprise,” Billy says. “Imagine that. King Steve hating fags.”

Like it’s *not* a surprise, like Billy doesn’t care. Like it’s a goddamn laugh.

And it’s not *really* a surprise. Billy had considered the possibility, the very *real* possibility. He just -- hadn’t necessarily wanted to hear the truth. Didn’t need that confirmation.

“Oh, yeah. Called Byers a queer before he got his ass beat by him.” Tommy grins, toothy and awful. “Maybe it caught, though. They're friends now, or whatever.”

Carol rolls her eyes and elbows Tommy. “You can't *catch* gay, Tommy.”

“I dunno,” Tommy drapes a sweaty arm over her shoulders. “He *is* hanging out with Chris. Maybe the freak rubbed off on him. Literally.”

He's cackling when Carol shoves him away, bitching about getting her a new drink, and Tommy laughs as he goes.

“You want anything, Hargrove?”

“Nah, you know what?” Billy says, “I think I’ll come with you. Meet this *Chris* for myself.”

He drapes an arm over Tommy’s shoulder and leads him toward the house, trying to ignore the way his heart is now pounding in his chest. They make their way to the kitchen in no time, and while there's people in and out of the swinging door, when they press inside there's only two people lingering.

Steve is on the counter, a glass in hand instead of a plastic cup, and Chris’ bulking figure is resting next to him on a hip, pouring more booze from a nice looking bottle. Steve is laughing, at something Chris has said if his grin is anything to go by, and Billy *knows* that look. Has seen it a few times, on others and in the mirror, and Billy’s surprised Chris doesn't try to put a hand on Steve's thigh when he sets the bottle aside.

Steve hates fags rings in his head. Tommy’s snide voice an echo and then a reality as he interrupts whatever moment Steve is in the middle of. Clearly -- *clearly* -- Tommy and Carol were a little wrong about that.

“You break into your dad's den again, Harrington?” Tommy asks.

Steve blinks over at them, straightening up a bit on the countertop. “Green isn't a good color on you, Tommy. If you want some, you just gotta ask.”

Billy’s arm is still loosely draped over Tommy’s shoulder. He does nothing to move it, appreciating someone to lean on, suddenly

feeling a little dizzy. A little off-balance.

“We wouldn’t want to *interrupt anything*,” Billy says. “That isn’t very *polite*, right Tommy?”

“Right,” Tommy says with a mean grin.

Steve's eyes flit to him, to the arm he's got around Tommy’s shoulders, and he raises a brow, pulling a slow drink from his glass. “You're not interrupting. Are they, Chris?”

“Nah, kitchen is kinda free game for drinks and shit, so.” Chris shrugs, arms folding over his chest, but his gaze lingers on Steve like he thinks they *are* interrupting. “The keg empty or something?”

Tommy eyes the bottle by Steve's hip. “Nah, it's --”

Billy clenches his teeth, hating the way Chris’ eyes hover over Steve. *Hating it.*

“We’re *real* thirsty,” Billy says.

He slaps Tommy on the shoulder and and lets Tommy go, taking a step closer to Steve. He absolutely ignores Chris, because he’s already decided that he hates the guy.

“You gonna share that good shit, King Steve?” Billy asks.

“Depends,” Steve says. “You gonna ask nicely?”

Billy thinks about it. He thinks of saying something shitty, something mean, something that would make Tommy laugh. But then he thinks of Steve’s lips twisting in a frown, thinks of the way that would make his stomach drop.

So, Billy puts on a grin, one of his *killer* ones, and gets all up close and friendly. “Pretty please?”

Steve blinks at him, leaning back a bit, as if to get a better look at the charm plastered all over Billy's face. His fingers curl at the edge of the counter, the corner of his mouth twitches, and Billy thinks he's made a mistake.

But then -- then Steve *laughs*. Laughs and reaches for the bottle, holding it out with a grin.

Billy sees Chris blink. Sees him shift a bit. Hears him clear his throat.

“Let me get you a glass --”

When Chris passes Steve a glass, Billy can’t help but grin, feeling a little gleeful. Feeling like he *won*.

“Thanks, man.” Billy’s voice is a little sharper when it’s aimed at Chris instead of at Steve. “Make it three.”

“Fuck, yes.” Tommy says as he pads up, eyeing the bottle as Billy pours.

Steve watches, nursing his own, quiet as his gaze moves between Billy and Tommy. He only looks away when Chris nudges at his knee.

He smiles, soft and easy, and it sets Billy’s teeth on edge.

“This is quality shit, Stevie.” Tommy says as he looks at the label. “Guess your taste isn't totally ruined.”

Steve's eyes narrow down at him, but his tone is almost bored. “Eat dick, Tommy.”

“Jesus, it's like you don't know how to have fun anymore. Or you *freak out* like --” Tommy grunts when Billy shoves two glasses against his chest. “*Hey*.”

Billy mostly just thanks god that Tommy didn’t make a joke about Steve eating dick. But he doesn’t have time to think about it -- instead, he knows he has to get rid of Tommy.

“You don’t want to leave Carol hanging, *huh*?”

“Yeah -- okay,” Tommy says, because Billy’s tone, his shark-like grin, doesn’t leave any room for refusal.

Billy pats him on the back, pushing him toward the door. “Go get

her, tiger." Like Tommy needs *any* help getting any from Carol. "Before she comes in here looking for you. Or me."

Billy fakes a shudder as Tommy walks away.

When he's gone, Billy turns his focus back on the only other two in the room. Steve gestures lazily between them, like some part of him grew up making polite introductions and now it's just habit.

"Chris, this is Billy Hargrove, star basketball player, Californian, general pain in my ass." Steve says, without a single hint of bite. "Hargrove, this is Christopher Barton, MVP two years running for his college team, and my old varsity captain home for the summer. He's not nearly as nice as he looks."

"You're just pissed I didn't give you tickets to the NCAA tournament when we seeded in." Chris says, sipping his drink and smiling at Billy. "Nice to meet you."

"Uh huh," Billy says. He gives himself a second to give Chris a once-over, kind of sneering as he does. He doesn't need Chris to like him, hell, he doesn't *want* Chris to like him.

Billy takes the glass that was poured for him, clinks it with Steve's, and takes a sip.

"Not half bad, pretty boy."

Steve huffs into his own glass, knocking it back, and rolling the glass between his palms. "Should be my life's slogan. *Not half bad.* Not great, but you know, not terrible."

Billy hums and let's his eyes roam a little, like he's appraising Steve's worth at *not half bad.* "Well, we all can't look *this* good."

Billy gestures down at himself, at his open shirt. At his abs.

Steve looks. Follows the suggestion of his hands with his eyes. Lingers.

Billy isn't sure if it's because he's tipsy. Or because he's admiring. Or maybe because he's jealous.

Either way, heat settles low in his stomach, and it has *nothing* to do with the bourbon in his glass.

“Wow,” Chris says. “He's full of himself *and* an asshole.”

Steve pulls his eyes away, startles like he hadn't realized he'd been staring, and smacks a hand at Chris' chest. “It's part of his charm. Pour me another?”

Immediately, the pleasant heat in Billy’s gut twists, going bitter and sour. His teeth clench and his eyes narrow as Steve smacks at Chris. He *hates* it. And he hates that it bothers him so much, too.

“*Hey*,” Billy says, turning on Chris. “At least I’m not camped out in my kitchen hitting on a guy who’s, what -- two, three years younger than me?”

Chris' eyes go wide. Steve *actually* shakes his head.

“He's not hitting on me,” Steve says on a laugh. “Just because he's *gay* doesn't mean --”

“I'm uhh…” Chris cuts him off, stepping back, and Steve frowns. “I'm gonna go check on the rest of the party. Make sure no one's dead. I'll be right back, Steve.”

And then he beats a hasty retreat, out of the kitchen, leaving Billy and Steve. Steve stares after him, brows pinched, lips parted.

Billy takes a careful sip of his drink, feeling pleased as hell but tentative, too. He knows Steve, knows he doesn’t appreciate Billy being a dick -- but he knows sometimes Steve just accepts it, too.

Before Steve can say anything, Billy shrugs his shoulders. “He was absolutely hitting on you, just FYI. Anyone with eyes could see it.”

“Um,” Steve's throat works; he's still staring at the door. “Right. Yeah.”

Slipping off the counter, Steve makes his way to his feet. Billy thinks, for a horrible moment, he might take off after Chris.

Instead, he turns and pours himself that drink. Downs it with a hiss. Braces against the counter.

“You're such a dick,” Steve says, pouring out more for himself and then holding up the bottle like a question.

“Well *yeah*,” Billy says. “But I’m also not wrong.”

Billy holds his glass out to Steve and watches as the amber liquid fills the glass. It’s good stuff -- but he’s already tipsy, probably not at all appreciating it to its full potential. But even if it was swill, he’d drink it just to spend a little more time with Steve.

Billy grins. “Sorry to break it to you, but he was trying real fucking hard to get into those ugly khakis, Harrington.”

“Shut the fuck up, Billy.” Steve sighs, but pours out enough to match his own glass -- and his face is red, his ears and neck too, and he glances at the door again when he turns back around to lean against the edge of the counter. “You don't know that.”

“I’ve got eyes. I *do* know that.” Billy takes a sip of his drink, probably drinking it a little too fast to be necessarily wise. But he’s running a little high on jealousy right now, so he can’t really blame himself. He doesn’t like the way Steve’s red at the idea, like he’s a little tempted, maybe. Or maybe just flattered. “Looks like he wasn’t too keen on being interrupted after all, huh?”

Steve makes a face at him, dry and maybe a little pissed off; Steve makes that face at him a lot. “Yeah, well, maybe knowing what I do now, *I'm* not too keen on being interrupted either.”

Billy tips the rest of the whiskey back and slams the cup down on the counter, letting that warmth fuel the fire suddenly burning inside him. He wants to stalk right out of this room and pick a fight -- or punch Chris right in the face. Instead, he crowds right up into Steve’s space.

Billy laughs. Loud and drunk and mean. “Don’t be an idiot, Harrington.”

Steve twists to face him, features going dark, arms crossing. “What?

You have a problem with it? Gonna call me a fag and take a swing? Do it."

Something twists inside Billy again. This time, it's guilt. Cold and oily and terrible. Billy wouldn't hit Harrington again -- but Steve doesn't know that. How could he.

Billy reaches forward -- like he's going to grab Steve's shirt and tug him close. Instead, though, he just straightens his collar and laughs, even though it's forced. Even though Billy feels a little dizzy, a little sick.

"Worst dressed fag I've seen. No, wait. I'm pretty sure that title goes to Chris." Billy grins. "You could do better."

Steve slaps his hand away, lips pursed. "Because you know so fucking much about me."

"Pretty sure someone who bagged Nancy fuckin' Wheeler could have his pick." Billy doesn't let Steve's slap get to him, just goes to pour himself some more of the whiskey. "He could at *least* be picky enough to not go for some overstuffed Kevin Costner wannabe."

"You wanna point me in a better direction or something?" Steve asks, making a wild gesture toward the door, and then staggers, dragging his hand through his hair and groaning into an open palm. "God, this is so stupid. This *conversation* is so stupid."

And god, Billy just about dies at that. His heart jumps into his throat, his pulse thundering in his ears.

It's a bad idea. It's one of the worst Billy has ever had. But Steve had seemed -- at least kind of interested in Chris, even just for lack of better options. And maybe Billy will take being Steve's last resort. It's better than nothing, anyway.

It doesn't take much to muster his courage.

"Sure thing," Billy says with a grin. He takes another step toward Steve, crowding him back up against that counter as he sets his glass down so he can prop one of his hands on the rim of the counter by Steve's waist. "Turns out, I got a *great* sense of direction." His words

are practically purred out, low and just for Steve.

Steve jerks slightly, knocks back against the edge of the counter until there's nowhere for him to go. His eyes are wide, that blush on his face again.

“Are you --?” Steve's throat works. “Are you hitting on me?”

Billy looks around, at the empty fucking kitchen. At the lack of Chris. He should be scared that anyone could walk in, but he's a little too drunk. A little too distracted.

“Do you see anyone else here? I sure as hell don't. *Someone's* gotta hit on you. Right, King Steve?”

He inches a little closer, eating up the space Steve vacates as he tries to squirm backward. Steve's breath catches when Billy presses flush; Billy can feel it, the way Steve's chest stalls against his. Can feel how warm he is, from the summer heat and the booze. And maybe from the attention, too.

His heart lurches when Steve's eyes drop to his mouth.

But then Steve's hands are on his chest, on sweaty hot skin, shoving him back and away. Then Steve's face is twisted up, teeth bared, as he knocks Billy back a step.

“You're such an *asshole*,” Steve says, but it's without the usual levity Billy's become used to. “You know, I thought maybe you'd make fun of me, maybe you'd hit me, but I didn't think you'd stoop this low.”

And *that* fucking burns just as much as he thought it would. But really -- Billy's been preparing for this rejection for way too long. He's imagined it, all of the different ways it could go. It's not a surprise, not in the slightest. And at least Steve hasn't socked him in the face. Right?

So, he laughs.

“I thought you were desperate, Harrington.” He steps forward again, pressing his luck just because he can. Because maybe he *wants* to get punched after all. “What, are your options really all that better

elsewhere?”

“Between you and someone who's *actually* interested and not just being a dick?” Steve says, face red and cheeks puffing out. “Yeah, pretty sure I can think of at least half a dozen better people who don't get off on yanking my chain.”

And isn't that the kicker? That when Billy's being dead fucking serious, Steve thinks it's a goddamn joke.

So, Billy grabs his chin, fingers right above his throat. Thumb, nearly brushing Steve's lower lip. “Who says I'm kidding?”

Steve's jaw winds tight. He shifts, where Billy has him pinned in, and lets out a sharp breath.

There's something bright and burning in his eyes, something beyond the bourbon and the anger that's got him wound tight like a damn startled cat. Billy thinks it looks like a challenge.

“Prove it,” Steve says.

Billy's gaze drops to Steve's lips. They're slightly parted and he's breathing hard, worked up and annoyed and angry -- all of it in Billy's direction. He swallows, biting back his dizziness and his instinct to back off, ignoring the part of him that *knows* this is a bad idea.

“Whatever,” Billy says with a shrug, stealing himself, giving Steve that one moment of warning before closing the gap between them and slotting their lips together in a kiss.

Steve makes a muffled sound against his mouth, and it buzzes over Billy's lips. He's tense, taut against him, barely even breathing, and he jerks with a little buck of a motion -- like he wasn't expecting Billy to actually do this.

But Billy presses in closer, harder, and Steve makes another sound before slumping against him. His hands bunch in the open front of his shirt and tug, head tilting and lips parting, his entire body saying *prove it, prove it, prove it*.

And Billy can. He's drunk enough to think this is a great idea and still together enough to be *good* at it. Because, at the end of the day, even drunk as a skunk, Billy Hargrove's a great kisser. Ask anyone.

He presses against Steve, moving his hand to the back of Steve's neck as he licks into his mouth, fingers trailing over his nape as Billy bites at his lower lip.

It's *good*. It's so much better than Billy ever imagined. He loses himself in it, greedy for more, kissing Steve deep, kissing him stupid.

And Steve -- Steve kisses him *back*.

Tasting bitter and smoky and sweet, Steve's tongue glides against his. His fingers curl and uncurl in Billy's shirt. His breath comes in short, stilted pants against Billy's mouth, his lips soft and warm and better than any dream.

At first, Billy can't believe it, can't believe it when he feels Steve's tongue against his, can't believe it when Steve doesn't push him away but pulls him closer still.

Can't believe it when Steve *moans*. Hushed and perfect and breathless, like melted sugar when it touches Billy's tongue. Can't believe it when Steve's fingers fan out over Billy's chest, palms warm, touch burning.

It's really too good to be true. Too hot, too close, too perfect. It's everything Billy has been dreaming about, *and more.* He presses Steve against the counter with the weight of his body, reveling in Steve's warmth, the feeling of those hands on his chest.

The door behind Billy clatters open. There's laugher, music pouring in after drunk teenagers, and Steve jerks back at the same time Billy does.

His eyes are wide, lips red and bitten as he stares at Billy, hair falling into his face. He looks gorgeous, and Billy wants to kiss him again.

But Steve's gaze darts to the people behind him, the girls giggling and the couple too wrapped up in each other to notice anything. His jaw winds tight and his hands drop to his sides, fingers twitching.

He opens his mouth to say something, *anything,* but he can't think of a single goddamn thing to say.

“Good talk,” Billy says, clapping Steve on the upper arm, instead of thinking up anything witty.

Then, he turns on his heel and leaves both Steve and his drink in the kitchen.

-*-

Billy avoids Steve for days, after that.

Despite their overlap, their near inability to *not* run into each other, Billy does his best. He drops Max off early at the Wheeler’s, claiming he’s got a date (he doesn’t). He doesn’t even get out of his car after wrangling Max and Lucas to the swimming pool because he says he’d rather spend his time getting high with Tommy H and Carol (he’d literally rather die, thanks). And he just narrowly manages to miss Steve while picking Max *up* from the Byers’, having to pass Steve on the dirt driveway of the house with Steve pulling in at the same time as Billy’s pulling out.

He’s nearly ready to pat himself on the back at a job well done when he goes to drop Max off at the pool on a Tuesday and there’s a big sign on the gate that declares it “Closed - Indefinitely.”

“What the hell?” Billy says, teeth clenching.

It’s nearly a hundred degrees out. The Camaro’s A/C is barely keeping up and he’s got a fiery redhead in the passenger seat who’s been bitching and needling at him *all morning* about why he’s avoiding Steve (he isn’t, he’s told her a million times -- it’s just coincidence).

So -- he’s already a little worked up, a little closer to *angry* than he’d like to be before lunch.

Max radios someone -- Billy isn’t paying attention -- and all she gets is static.

“Drive out further,” Max tells him, like *she* gives the orders around

here, not him.

“Or I take you back to the house and you can watch Scooby Doo and eat ice cream all day. How about that?”

She narrows her eyes. “We don’t have ice cream.”

“I’ll buy you some.”

Billy doesn’t want to cart her anywhere *else* today. She’s already late because Billy figured if he dropped her off at 12 when everyone else was meeting at 11, he could slip away unnoticed, at least from the pool with its wide parking lot and fenced-in interior. Now, he’ll have to drive her somewhere *else*, where he can’t just skip out. Where he can’t just slide away unnoticed from Steve Harrington.

“Drive,” she says.

He’d be proud of her determination if he wasn’t so annoyed about it right now.

They drive around for half-a-fucking-hour before Max picks something up on her radio. Billy’s heart sinks when she tells him they’re all at the quarry.

Billy drives them past the McDonalds at the edge of town on the way there, because he’s hungry. Because he’s going to eat one of these kids alive if anyone so much as talks to him before he’s got something in his stomach. He eats his hamburger in three bites, orders both of them vanilla shakes, and speeds off to somewhere he really doesn’t want to go.

Of course Steve’s Bimmer is parked in the shade when they get there. *Of course* the guy’s spread out on a blanket in the nearby dappled light. *Of course* every single one of Max’s friends is already playing in the water, which means Billy can’t even suggest she go hang out with someone else.

He tears into the lot and skids to a stop right behind Steve’s car. Max is out the second the wheels stop turning, bounding over to the water.

He hears her call a *hi, Steve; bye, Steve* as she goes by Steve's sprawled form. Hears Steve grunt out a laugh, waving, before watching Steve drape an arm over his eyes, chest rising and falling with a deep sigh.

Billy still remembers what kissing him felt like. What being pressed up against him, fingers in his hair felt like. What he sounded like and tasted like.

Seeing him now, laid out over a ratty old plaid blanket, skin glistening in the unbearable weight of the heat, chest falling with each breath, lips parted with it, half his face hidden beneath his arm, Billy remembers it all. Feels the ache of it in his ribs, like his bones remember too.

There's no way Steve doesn't know he's here. Not with Max greeting him, not with the rumble of the Camaro announcing their arrival. Yeah, Billy could drive off -- but he doesn't *necessarily* want to do that, either.

Billy gets out of his car, lights up a cigarette, and lingers in the shade for a moment. Sunglasses on, just watching Steve, watching the water and the kids splashing around in it.

Eventually, though, he wanders over to the blanket and stands in Steve's light.

"Pool's closed, huh?"

Steve doesn't move. Doesn't look at him, arm still over his eyes.

"Something about chemicals," Steve says.

"This town is fucked up," Billy says, sitting down on the edge of Steve's blanket, even though he wasn't invited. It's not like he brought his own -- he hadn't been planning on staying at the pool. "Chemicals everywhere."

Steve snorts. "Not those kinds of chemicals. Something about the chlorine."

Billy shrugs, not that Steve can see him, still hidden under his arm. It gives Billy a good chance to look at him, to watch his bare chest rise

and fall with each breath, to admire how toned his body is, even for someone who apparently doesn't work out.

Billy shucks his own shirt, tosses it so that it lands on top of Steve's head.

Steve jerks up, flails and tosses the shirt aside, hair a mess when he shoots Billy a dirty look. He balls up the black cotton and chucks it toward the water, where it lands in the shallows with a flop.

"Asshole," Steve says, and then collapses down onto his back again, arm draping over his eyes.

Billy isn't entirely sure how *that* makes him an asshole, and not *Steve*, who threw his shirt into quarry water. Billy makes a face, stands, and fishes the thing out of the water. He stomps back over to the blanket and drops it straight on Steve's stomach.

"Dick," Billy says, as it lands with a wet flop.

Steve props himself up onto his elbows. He fists the wet shirt in his hand and chucks it up at Billy's face.

"Bitch."

Billy frowns with a bitten lip to keep himself from smiling. The pain of his teeth sinking into flesh is kind of nice. It's distracting, anyway. And besides -- his lips taste like vanilla ice cream, still.

"You should be thanking me. I'm sure you're cooler, now," Billy says, after grabbing the shirt and ringing it out over his own torso. The water isn't too cold, but it's better than the thick heat of the day, and it's refreshing, too, especially after the long drive.

"Thanks," Steve drolls.

He doesn't know if he imagines it, if it's just wishful thinking, but Steve's eyes drop to his chest, to the lines of wet muscle there, and then away again. Billy thinks about dropping to his knees, about crawling over him, about kissing him stupid again.

"Haven't seen you around," Steve says, gaze drifting to where Will

screeches. “Normally, you're like a pest I can't get rid of.”

“Been busy,” Billy says, still hovering so that he blocks the sun from Steve’s face. So that Steve can’t quite look at his face easily, silhouetted by the sun as he is.

“I'm sure,” Steve huffs, and then gives him a glass smile, cold and sharp and fake. “Not like you're avoiding me or anything, right? What happened to all that bravado?”

Billy always forgets just how biting Steve can be, how barbed. He’s nothing, really, like how Billy thought he was when they’d first met. Nothing like the soft-bellied guy Tommy H paints him as when he bitches to Billy about his childhood best friend. Nothing like the friendly, babysitter he is for the kids. Around Billy, he usually gives as good as he gets -- and Billy *always* forgets.

“Careful, Harrington. Maybe that says something about your skills,” Billy grins.

“My skills? I don’t think my *skills* had anything to do with you running off like a chicken shit.” Steve scoffs, still on his elbows, but something in his expression breaks a little. “Listen, I get it. I didn’t exactly mean to-- I dunno *come out* to you or whatever. I’m sure you were weirded out-- are weirded out-- or something.”

Or something, Billy thinks. He toes at Steve’s side, once, before letting himself fall down again onto the edge of the blanket, plenty of space between the two of them.

“*Pretty* sure it’s your skills,” Billy says.

He can’t help but be distracted at how Steve had put it. He *hadn’t meant to come out* -- which means. Well. It means Steve clearly doesn’t hate fags as much as Tommy H seems to think.

But Billy doesn’t get to say anything about it, doesn’t get to dwell on the idea of, what, Steve liking guys? Because suddenly, Max and Will and Dustin are at the edge of the towel, chattering away and interrupting whatever peace and quiet Steve and Billy had had.

“Dustin says you have watermelon,” Max says.

Billy looks at Steve, and then at a cooler that's sitting over near the blanket, more firmly in the shade.

"Dustin would be right," Steve says, sitting up with a sigh and tugging it closer. "Is that your way of asking for some?"

"I'll take some," Billy says, lobbing his shirt back at Steve. He grins. "Pretty please?"

Echoing the other night as best as he can.

Max kicks him in the back. "Don't give him any, he'll eat all of it."

"That right?" Steve eyes Billy for a long second, popping open the cooler-- he's already got the watermelon cut up into triangles, nestled into a tubberware container, and Billy can see the bottles of water and other shit he's packed away in there, always the worried mother hen. "Well, there's plenty to go around."

Dustin plops down, eager, and makes grabby hands. Steve laughs and sets out the container for them to pick from.

Billy hasn't had watermelon in years.

Greedy, he snatches up a couple pieces and chomps down onto them, letting the icy juice drip down his fingers. He's three pieces in before he shoves Max in the shoulder. She had sat down next to him, which really speaks volumes to how much she doesn't seem to hate him all that much, lately.

"Say *thank you* to your babysitter, Maxine."

"You first," Max hisses, nibbling on her piece.

Steve glances at them, but then cracks open a bottle of water and passes it to Will as he tucks up on the blanket, towel around his shoulders.

Billy just hums, snagging another piece of watermelon. He licks his lips halfway through. "He's not *my* babysitter. I'm just mooching."

"*Fine*," Max huffs, but then gives Billy a tight, wicked little grin

before pushing to her feet and padding over to Steve.

Billy nearly chokes when she leans down a smacks a watermelon wet kiss to Steve's cheek.

"*Thanks*, Steve." She says, sweet as pie, and Steve's eyes are big and wide up at her.

"Uh. You're welcome?"

Dustin beams, rocking up onto his knees, catching Steve's other cheek. "Thanks, Steve!"

Steve sputters, shoving them both away. "Go back to trying to break your necks in the quarry, *jesus*."

Max takes Dustin by the arm as she goes, cackling much too much like Billy, head tossed back as they go back to join Lucas and Mike in the water.

Will lingers, huddled under his towel. His big eyes dart up from his watermelon rind to Steve, and then back down.

Steve sighs, but his smile is soft and fond; tentative and a little sweet. "C'mon. Get it over with."

Will startles a bit, big eyes wide and face red, and he darts forward to give Steve a little kiss on the cheek too before scampering off after his friends. Steve blows out a breath, shaking his head as he watches them go, splashing around in the water, laughter ringing in the air.

Billy can feel a little bit of the day's heat creep into his cheeks, even though they're in the dappled sunlight of Steve's blanket. He thinks about kissing Steve, first on the cheek, then stealing a real kiss on the lips. He takes another slice of watermelon and takes a thoughtful bite, eyes on Steve, lips quirking up into a smirk.

"I hope you don't expect a kiss for all of your troubles. *Pretty sure* I heard from somewhere that your skills are a little lacking."

"Pretty sure you're full of shit," Steve pulls the tubberware close and fishes out a wedge for himself, biting in and wiping his chin off with

the back of his hand. “And I’m not expecting anything from you.”

Billy is always full of shit. He’s rarely serious, unless he’s angry. But with Steve, everything’s a game, a show, a sham. It’s like they just can’t be straight with one another, always caught up in posturing and biting insults back and forth.

“Yeah?” Billy says, taking another slow bite of his watermelon, letting his tongue catch the juice that drips down his chin. “And if I did?”

Steve leans back on a hand, squinting at him. “I guess that depends on what exactly you’re expecting. Cuz if it’s an apology, it’s not gonna happen.”

Billy finishes off his piece of melon, biting a little too far into the bitter rind. “Not sure what you’ve got to apologize for.”

“Making you uncomfortable,” Steve says, then shrugs, picking out a few seeds from his watermelon, eyes straying down. “For making you kiss me.”

“Pretty sure there wasn’t a gun to my head,” Billy says. “Pretty sure *you* couldn’t *make* me do anything.”

“True,” Steve snorts, passing him a small smile. “Been trying to make you stop acting like a dick for ages.”

Billy laughs a little, because it’s funny, because honestly, he’s less of a dick to Steve than to anyone else. Which is -- not saying a lot, really, but it’s the truth, regardless.

“So, what, were you trying to hook up with that guy?” *Chris*, Billy thinks, but he doesn’t want to seem like he cares enough to know his name. Billy Hargrove doesn’t give a shit, and he certainly wasn’t jealous.

Steve’s entire face shrugs. “I dunno. Maybe? It’s all kind of… new. Figured Chris was a safe bet.”

Jesus. Billy can’t help but laugh at that, loud and stupid. He pictures *Chris*, bulky and as unattractive as Billy finds him, as someone’s first

time. It's terrible, he thinks, mostly because he kind of hated Chris on sight. And because Steve deserves a good first time with a guy, and the idea of thinking about that is eating him up enough to make him angry and uncomfortable.

"And Tommy said you hated fags," Billy says, coming down from his laughter.

"Yeah, well, Tommy also thinks the moon landing was faked." Steve says. "And I'm not-- I'm not *gay*. I just… like who I like. Sometimes that's girls, sometimes that's guys."

And that's -- not really what Billy thought he'd say. It throws him a little bit for a loop, leaves him feeling like he's had a sugar rush, just from a few pieces of watermelon.

"Very progressive of you, for this piece of shit town."

"I've seen too much crazy shit to care about bullshit," Steve says. "I'm surprised *you* don't give a shit, though."

Billy -- well, he doesn't quite freeze, but he does still. He digs his thumbnail into the watermelon rind, feels the way it yields to the press.

Then, he makes himself shrug. There's no need to really posture here. Nothing to *lose*, except for his own pride and saying out loud what he already *knows* but has never truly said.

"You can only give a shit about so many things," Billy says. "Besides -- I kissed you, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but that wasn't--" Steve fumbles, shifts and tucks his feet under himself. "You weren't actually-- you know."

Billy grabs another piece of watermelon, sinks his teeth into the cold flesh of it. "My tongue was in your mouth. If you're going to say I *wasn't kissing you*, you've got a real weird definition of kissing, pretty boy."

"Yeah, but you were just calling my bluff. Or-- I dunno, proving you weren't full of shit, or something."

Billy takes another bite of the watermelon, considering.

“C’mere,” Billy finally says. He finishes off the watermelon and opens up his posture. “You wanted a safe bet, right?”

Steve blinks up at him, lips parted, and he hesitates. “Are you telling me you’re a safe bet?”

“Sure,” Billy says with a grin. He relaxes his shoulders a little more, tries to ignore the pounding of his heart in his chest. “Of course I’m safe.”

Never once has anyone *ever* called Billy safe.

Steve stares at him for a beat longer. Then, he drops his half eaten slice back into the tubberware container and moves. Crawls closer, on his hands and knees, and eyes Billy with a careful consideration.

He stops, right beside him, and rests his weight back on his heels. “You don’t give a shit, huh?”

Billy bites the inside of his cheek, trying not to think about the kids playing in the water so close by. Here, half shaded by the tree, he tries to pretend they’re in another fucking world.

“Not a single shit,” Billy says.

He plants a hand in front of him, palm on the scratchy blanket, and leans forward. He grabs Steve’s cheek with his other hand, and closes the distance between the two of them before he can think better of it. He kisses Steve, slotting their lips together in a perfect memory of the other night when it had felt so perfect, so dizzying.

He doesn’t let it last long, pulling back after only a moment -- just in case.

“Besides,” Billy says. “I never thanked you for the watermelon.”

Steve’s eyes are wide on his face. His cheeks are flush, his lips parted, and his gaze drops down to Billy’s mouth.

“Billy,” he says. “What exactly are you-- saying?”

“I’m not bluffing. Or trying to prove shit to you,” Billy says. His heart is pounding because he just kissed Steve Harrington *again*. Because Steve is still looking at Billy’s lips. “I’m saying I’ve got a good sense of direction and I know what I’m doing. If you’re -- looking for a tour guide, or whatever.”

Steve searches his face, eyes hunting over it, like he’s trying to see if Billy’s trying to bullshit him. “You wanna be my tour guide.”

It’s not a question. Even if it were, Steve doesn’t give him time to answer it.

He’s busy leaning down, leaning over, hand curving over Billy’s jaw and angling his face up into another kiss.

Billy doesn’t let it get too heated. As much as he wants to push Steve onto his back, clamber over him and push him against the ground like he owns him -- he can’t. Not here, not now. The kids are playing, but it’s only a matter of time before one of them looks over to see what their babysitter is up to. Before one of them comes over to get a slice of watermelon and starts screaming about Billy defiling Steve, or whatever.

Besides -- there’s plenty of time to defile Steve later. After hours, in the dark somewhere.

But Billy does kiss him deep for a long moment. And despite Billy’s protests from earlier, Steve is a *good kisser*. He gives as good as he gets, opens up for Billy and *takes* when Billy gives him the space to.

He’s glad he doesn’t have to pull back, doesn’t think he could’ve if he’d tried, despite how dangerous and ridiculous he knows it is. Steve does it for him, a hint of teeth dragging over his lip as he pulls away.

It rips a groan right out of him. Steve’s eyes are fever bright when he sits back up, his grin sly.

“What were you saying about my skills?”

“They could use some work,” Billy says, but he knows his voice is low and gravelly and he *knows* what his eyes look like. He knows they’re

dark, all pupil, half closed.

He licks his lips and swallows, tasting watermelon, tasting Steve.

“I guess you’ll have to show me,” Steve says, and he imagines it’s supposed to be teasing, but instead it’s kind of breathless-- like Steve is awed at the possibility.

“Guess so,” Billy says.

Clearly, they separated not a moment too soon, because suddenly, Billy blinks and there’s kids everywhere, demanding *food*. And Billy can’t even be mad, because it feels like Steve’s lips dulled the anger in him, the irritability from earlier. It feels like Steve smoothed out some of his wrinkles, and that in and of itself is a little terrifying.

“Don’t hold out on us,” Dustin says, always the ring leader when it comes to dealing with Harrington, apparently. He plops down next to Steve again and the rest of the kids start to follow suit. “I know you’ve got the goods.”

Billy moves so he’s sitting next to Steve and Max sits down on his other side.

Steve rolls his eyes, plopping back, and he digs back into his cooler, pulling out more tubberware-- filled to the brim with chips and sandwiches and all kinds of other shit. He tosses a water at Mike and at Lucas, and they all tuck in.

Steve glances over at Billy, partway through their meal, chewing slow. He gives him a smile, and they don’t say a word-- but there’s something in it, their mutual quiet, drowned by the back and forth of the kids.

Something like a promise.

-*-

A few shared kisses does not a promise make.

It doesn’t stop Billy from dreaming about Steve’s mouth on his. Doesn’t stop him from thinking about watermelon kisses, or sunshine

warm skin, or a hint of teeth.

It doesn't stop him from dreaming in hazy blue light of the early morning. Steve in his bed, in his lap, looking down at him. Steve's mouth sweet and lazy against his. Steve looking at him, grinning, and saying *show me what to do*.

And, unfortunately, Billy doesn't see Steve much outside of the kids. There's always a crowd around Steve, wherever he goes, a flock of kids on his heels. Or, even when he sees him without them, Jonathan and Nancy at his sides as he smiles and waves and ducks into the theatre opposite of him and his usual sycophants.

Billy doesn't get more than a few kisses and his dreams.

Not until a Monday morning, on the first of July, and he spies Steve jogging along the road just after sunrise. He's out just to get out, to get away from Neil and his heavy fists, was out all night in his Camaro hiding. But then he sees Steve, hair mussed and face sweaty, shirt clinging like he's been at this since before dawn.

He wonders why that is, even before he rolls up slow next to him, window cranked down, driving down the wrong side of the road. "Morning, pretty boy."

Steve startles. He's got headphones on and he's panting heavy. Looks like he hasn't gotten much sleep either.

Knocking them off his head, he pauses his cassette player where it rests clipped to the hip of his gym shorts, and frowns at Billy. "Hey. You're out and about early."

Dawn in Hawkins is kind of beautiful. It makes Steve look even more beautiful, too.

"How else am I supposed to find hot babysitters on their morning runs? If you wait too long," Billy says. "All the good ones are taken."

Steve's already red face goes a shade deeper. But he wets his lips and shuffles close, leaning a hand on the top of the car and giving a lopsided grin.

“Are you propositioning me?”

“Sounds like it,” Billy says, all grins.

He can’t help but admire the way Steve drips with sweat, the way his shirt clings tight. Billy wants to taste the sweat on him, wants to lick him clean. And isn’t *that* a thought better than coffee.

“I’ll have you know I’m not that kinda guy, Mr. Hargrove.” Steve says, mouth twisting curiously between amused and excited. “But I might make an exception if you give me a lift home. The sun’s finally up and I’m already dying.”

“Well then get in the car, Harrington.” Billy says.

He didn’t *think* he’d be driving Steve home today. Didn’t think he’d see Steve at all. But he’s definitely fine with it.

Steve makes quick work of it. Pulls open the door and slides into the passenger seat.

He groans when the A/C hits him. Head tipped back against the headrest, breath still coming heavy and hot. He closes his eyes and sits there, unaware or perhaps uncaring of Billy’s gaze, throat bared and skin glistening.

“Fuck, it’s humid out today.” Steve huffs.

Jesus, Steve is hot.

Billy looks freely, unencumbered by his usual sunglasses. Now, if he gets caught staring at Steve, he might win something instead of lose.

“Uh huh,” Billy says, reaching over to pull at Steve's damp shirt, tugging it away from his body only to let it fall back against damp skin. “I can tell.”

Steve flinches, knocking his hand away, but he laughs as he slumps in his seat. “You gonna drive or are you gonna stare at me all day?”

With that, Billy takes his hand back to himself and peels off down the block, in the direction of Steve's house. He's never been inside the

place, but he *has* picked Max up there before.

His parents are never home, Carol had told him. Billy hadn't cared too much then, but he sure as hell does now.

Not that he's expecting anything. He doesn't even *know* what Steve really wants. He just knows he has a chance right now, and he's not going to blow it.

At the house, he parks diagonally in the driveway, parking Steve's Bimmer in, just because he can.

“Are you going to invite me inside?” Billy asks. “Or am I just a taxi today?”

Steve twists to look at him, brow up, and he gestures toward his house with a swing of his head. “Billy, would you like to come in?”

Billy grins. “Well, that's *awful* kind of you, King Steve.” He glances at the house like he's thinking about it, like the answer isn't *obviously yes*. “Why the hell not,” he settles on, and climbs out of the car.

Steve slides out after him, jogging up to the door and pulling out a key from under a bush by the side. He unlocks one of the double doors and slips inside, leaving it open behind him for Billy to follow.

The foyer is open and broad, the house bright and beautiful, almost all of the lights on within-- even with daylight streaming in from large windows. Billy eyes the stairs that lead up into the house as Steve toes off his sneakers, and he’d be more interested in sniffing around and nosing his way into Steve’s home, Steve’s life, if Steve wasn’t stripping his headphones off so that he could pull his sweat damp shirt up and over his head.

Beautiful as the house is, the muscles of Steve’s back, the smooth skin that disappears into his shorts, is far more appealing to look at.

“Fuck, I need a shower.” Steve huffs, scrubbing a hand over his head, wiping his face off on his shirt before setting it aside on a glass table in the foyer with his headphones and cassette player.

Billy closes the distance between the two of them, longing to get his

hands on Steve's abs. Instead, he looks, greedy. Waiting for the briefest indication that he *can*, that it's fine.

“Do you really need one?” There's something about Steve like this, so raw, so real, that Billy wants to eat up.

Steve twists to face him, barking out a laugh, head bobbing. “I’m a hot mess. I’ve been running for, like, at least an hour. I’m disgusting. A shower is *absolutely* necessary.”

Billy doesn't care. He doesn't give one single shit. Steve hasn't pushed him away, hasn't turned away from Billy to discourage him. So, he leans forward and brushes his lips against Steve's. Like they do this all the time, like it's nothing.

“You're hot is what you are,” Billy says, voice rough and raspy.

He gets a hand on Steve's bare stomach just to feel it slick with sweat, fingers running down the planes of his abs as Billy kisses him again. This time, deeper. More hungry.

Steve's skin jumps under his fingertips, just like that first time Billy had pressed out the tension in Steve's back at the pool. He makes a sound from the back of his throat as Billy's lips part his, and Billy tastes it on the tip of his tongue as muscles tighten under the flat of his palm.

Steve sways into him, breathing sharp through his nose, and his hands come up to grip at Billy's biceps. His fingers curl and squeeze at muscle, the cotton of Billy's shirt sleeves bunching a little as Steve smoothes his hands higher.

Billy pulls him close, and closer still. Until Steve is flush against him, body cooling in the air conditioned house.

“Jesus,” Billy murmurs against Steve's lips, one hand settling on the small of Steve's back, finding the heat that pools there at the base of his spine.

He wants to give Steve everything, all at once.

“What do you want?” Billy asks, instead of offering himself up for

Steve to have, no holds barred. “I'm open to some trade negotiations.”

“I, um…” Steve blinks like he's dizzy, clears his throat because his voice comes out tight and low, and shifts against him, laugh short but bringing a smile to his face. “Honestly, I didn't think this was gonna -- I mean, I'm definitely not complaining, but I wasn't actually expecting.”

Billy is no stranger to coming on too strong. But Steve isn't complaining, he even *said*, so Billy calls it a win.

“Well,” he says, dipping his head low to mouth over Steve's neck. He's *delicious*, Billy thinks, skin salty with sweat and warm under the flat press of his tongue. “It'd be a shame for you to shower just for me to get you all dirty again.”

Steve's breath catches, and his head falls back and over. Reveals the stretch of his throat to him, and he shuffles that much closer, clinging at Billy's arms.

“Billy,” Steve says, swallowing and sounding like he means to go on, add more, but he moans behind his teeth instead as Billy's arms pull taut around him.

“C’mon, baby,” Billy says, as Steve shudders at the press of his teeth against his pulse. “Can I get my hands on you? Or,” he licks up Steve's neck and bites at his ear, “my mouth on you?”

Panting shallow and soft, Steve nods. His throat works, fingers curling and flexing into the tight muscles before Billy’s shoulders, and he arches, presses more fully against him, and Billy can feel the weight of his arousal at his hip.

“Yeah,” Steve breathes. “Anything -- *anything*.”

It doesn't take much effort to walk Steve back toward the stairs, kissing him as he goes. It takes even less effort to push him down onto them, Steve sitting, Billy kneeling just a couple steps down, tucked in between his legs.

It gives Steve some height, the ability to look down at Billy. It gives

him a little power, even if Billy's the one taking the lead.

Billy's mouth waters as his hands go for the waistband of Steve's shorts. He runs a tongue along his lips and looks up at Steve, intentions fucking obvious.

Steve squirms under that look. Shifts on his perch, wetting his lips in something Billy recognizes as nervous anticipation.

He clutches at the edge of the stairs behind the small of his back and gives a little nod.

“I assume *this* isn't entirely uncharted territory for you,” Billy says.

He dips his thumbs under the waist of Steve's shorts and *pulls*, sliding them off Steve, along with his underwear, too.

Billy takes a minute to drink it all in, sitting back to admire the sight of a sweaty, naked Steve Harrington on display right in front of him. All for him.

“Not entirely,” Steve says, grinning a little, face and neck and chest all flush again -- like when Billy had just picked him up. “Is it for you?”

Billy grins, leaning in to press a wet kiss against the meat of Steve's thigh. His skin is still hot to the touch and he tastes just as good as he did earlier.

“No.” The word feels weighty in his mouth, more bitter than the salty taste of sweat. “But I can pretend for you, if you want.”

He bites a little, inching higher on Steve's thigh. The muscle jumps. Steve hisses a little and spreads his legs.

“No,” he says, and the house is a hush outside of their breathing, outside of the putter of the A/C, outside of Steve's voice. “No, I don't want you to pretend.”

“Good,” Billy says. “Don't think I'd be able to convince you, anyway. I'm too good.”

And it's not a lie. Billy's good with his tongue and he's certainly had some *practice* at this, before. Before Hawkins happened to him.

He works his way up Steve's thigh, trailing saliva and bite marks in his wake. There's no preamble when he gets to Steve's cock, no shyness to be found. He licks it, hard and swollen as it is, from base to shaft, and then slides his lips over it, consumed by the need to taste him fully, to have Steve inside him.

Steve is tangy and salty, a warm velvet weight on his tongue. He twitches, gasping out, and breathes a heavy *fuck* to the ceiling as Billy takes him by the hips.

He says Billy's name, too. The same breathless way he cursed. And his name on Steve's lips, at the beginning of pleasure, is better than Billy could've imagined. Hotter, sweeter, *softer*.

When he sinks down more, Steve slumps against the stairs and bucks with a strained grunt-- the stairs pressing against his back, leverage coming only with a bit of pain. It's heady, having Steve completely bare before him while Billy aches in his jeans.

Billy isn't shy. He has no qualms about showing his enthusiasm, mouthing over and sucking on Steve's cock like it's his property. Like Billy owns him, like he's fucking worshiping him.

But it's not *quite* enough, Billy thinks. So, he grabs one of Steve's hands and guides it to his hair. An open invitation to touch. To pull.

And Steve does pull. Fists his fingers into his hair and reaches up to brace against the step above his own head with his other hand, tugging at Billy's curls and choking on a whine.

He's a gorgeous mess when Billy gets a look at him, the faintest sting of pain when Steve pulls, only when Billy takes him too deep or sucks him too hard-- like he's running from the edge rather than letting Billy coax him toward it. His chest is heaving, muscles straining, skin covered in a fresh sheen of sweat as Billy works him over.

It's a lot. Billy's been dying to get his mouth on Steve all year, but he never thought it would actually *happen*.

He reaches a hand down to palm himself through his jeans as he takes Steve deep into his throat, those fingers tightening in his hair as Steve moans above him.

“Billy--” Steve gasps, tugging again, jerking beneath him. “*Billy*, I’m gonna--”

There's nothing Billy wants more than to feel Steve come down his throat. He groans at the thought.

So, he picks up his pace. Goes harder, faster. Gets a little messy with it, sloppy. He can't hide his own breathy noises, either, as he palms himself at the thought of getting Steve off.

Steve scrambles under him. Nails drag over his scalp. Steve’s thighs jump, his abdomen winds tight, and he pulls at the mess of Billy’s curls as he cries out, breathless and blissed. He hears Steve say his name again, hears him call to him like a warning and a plea, but then Steve is coming for him, arching and spilling out with a shattered shudder of a movement.

He feels the shake of Steve’s hips under his hands, tastes the heat of him on his tongue, and works him through it as Steve tugs at his hair and digs his fingers uselessly into the step beneath him. He feels the way Steve goes boneless as he gasps and pants, one of his legs kicking out a bit as Billy sucks over the length of his spent cock.

It's one of the hottest things Billy's ever experienced. Which is a little sad and a little stupid, given that Billy's been around a bit. But he's wanted Steve for *so long.*

It's impossible not to feel dizzy with it.

Billy cleans him off good, licking him clean until Steve is choking out a little noise and pulling Billy up and off his dick with firm hands in his hair.

“So,” he says, voice rough. He bites at Steve's sunkissed thigh and watches him shudder. “Any different than a bitch, or do I have to try harder next time?”

Next time, Billy thinks, hopefully.

Steve stares down at him with dark eyes, still trying to catch his breath. His lips are parted, bitten and red, and his skin is shiny and flush as he pants, little aftershocks trembling up through him. Billy wants to lay him out and gets his mouth on every inch of him.

But then Steve moves. Pulls at Billy's hair and catches his shirt, tugging hard until Billy has to shuffle up the steps to meet him, even as Steve curves up to catch his mouth. It's sloppy and wet, more lips than tongue, and Steve wedges an arm between them to palm at the evidence of his arousal in his jeans.

"Better," Steve breathes against his mouth, between one kiss and the next. "Show me how to touch you."

Jesus. If Steve keeps talking like that, he's not going to need to be touched at all. He's going to come in his pants and be real embarrassed about it.

So he shifts a little, kneels on the step below Steve, and unbuttons his pants. His cock springs free, aching and red, as he shoves his pants and briefs down.

With a breath, Billy takes Steve's fingers in his and guides them to his cock, taking his time. For Steve, but also for himself. He wants to savor this, as best as he can, despite the fact that it's hard not to lose himself in this fantasy-come-true.

Steve's touch is warm. Gentle. Tentative until Billy's fingers tighten a bit over his.

They catch a bit of precome drooling from the tip and drag it down, slicking him as they go. Billy, guiding Steve's hand over his cock, pressing into the stroke of his fingers and his palm. It's overwhelming, perfect, so good Billy feels like he might come apart right then.

But Steve is panting against his mouth. Peppering kisses to his lips, to the corner of his mouth, watching his face with those big, dark eyes as Billy works Steve's hand over his length. And Billy wants this to last.

Steve pulls his fingers through Billy's hair, gentle and easy and kind. Untangles it as he kisses his cheek, as he gives a squeeze at the base of his cock, and then curves his hand against the line of Billy's jaw, looking at him like he's a gift.

"I wanna see it," Steve breathes, moving with him when Billy rocks. "Wanna watch you come."

As much as he wants it to last, as much as he wants this moment to drag on for forever, he knows it cannot. Especially not with Steve talking like that, looking at him like that.

Billy let's Steve's hand go, letting him fly free as he balances himself on Steve's knees. He wants to look down at his own cock and watch himself fuck Steve's hand, but there's something even better about Steve having him by the jaw.

Steve's fingers brush against the soft underside of his neck with a shift of his grip, gentle, and that's it. It's the stupidest goddamn thing, that Billy loses it at something so *delicate*, but he does. He feels himself choking back a moan as his orgasm hits him, as he spills himself over Steve's fingers. Onto his own shirt.

He feels broken, laid bare, panting in between Steve's legs.

So, Billy owns the moment, surging forward to catch Steve in a kiss, instead of feeling vulnerable and *seen*.

Steve lets him. Kisses him back with a soft moan, stroking him through it until Billy's weight fully settles against him.

Then, he groans and pulls back, head resting against the edge of the step behind him, letting it lull there. He shifts, making a face, and grins at Billy as he breathes heavy.

"That's one way to start the morning," Steve mutters, fingers still around Billy's cock, giving a little squeeze. "Though, I gotta say, sex on the stairs isn't great for the back."

When Steve squeezes, Billy makes a sound. Louder and probably more embarrassing than anything else he's done so far. He falls forward and lets his head fall against Steve's neck. In the safe, warm

place between his head and his shoulder.

He savors it for a moment, the closeness, though he knows it's not necessarily what Steve signed up for. It's not what Billy's known for. So, after a second, he pushes back, hands against the stairs.

“Shower?”

“Please,” Steve says, glancing down at the mess they’d made of each other. “If I didn’t need one before, I definitely need one now.”

He waits until Steve lets him go to pull away. Tugs his jeans back up his hips, despite the mess and the fact that he’ll be losing them again soon, and then helps Steve up off of the stairs.

When Steve turns and catches him by the wrist to lead him up into his house, Billy follows. He sees the indentations left on his skin, from where the stairs dug in at his back, and wants to soothe over it with a heavy hand.

They get to the lavish bathroom with ease. Steve strips off the only scrap of clothes left on him-- his socks-- and then turns to crank the shower on until steam fogs up the glass of the shower door. He looks over his shoulder at Billy, still dressed, and lifts a brow.

“Gonna join me?”

Honestly, Billy was going to wait. He has no idea how this shit is supposed to work. No idea where the various lines are.

But he strips off his clothes anyway, now that he's *invited*, and follows Steve into the shower.

“Jesus,” Billy breathes out, at the water pressure, at the heat of the water that's warmer than he'd ever get at his house. “This is ritzy.”

Steve snorts, eyeing him as he steps close and hovers under the spray with him. “The shower and the kitchen are the best parts of this whole damn place.”

Tipping his head back, Steve hums and lets hot water run down over the top of his head and through his hair. Billy watches as it rolls over

his skin, washing away all the sweat. He feels the heat of him, too, not quite touching but pressed up close. Far closer than they'd ever been in the showers at school.

It's a dream come true. Hazy with lack of sleep and the pleasant lull of a recent orgasm, it's better than Billy's felt in ages. So, he just lets himself enjoy it.

He leans back against the cool wall of the tile and just watches Steve. Enjoys the lazy way he moves, the carefree way he lets himself just *be*.

They don't wash each other off. Though, that's not to say Billy's not tempted. He'd like his hands, slick and soapy, all over Steve's skin and sinking into his hair. But they keep to themselves, mostly, brushing against each other as they turn under the spray of the showerhead.

It's only when they're both clean that Steve leans in and takes more. Catches Billy's mouth briefly, chastely, water still pouring down warm-- like maybe the Harrington's have an unlimited supply of the stuff-- and then pulls back.

"That okay?" Steve asks.

"Yeah," Billy breathes out after a moment. It's more than okay, but Billy knows better than to show Steve his hand.

He doesn't know what this is. If it's just Steve wanting to fool around, just like Billy offered, just like he'd said. Or if it could be something more. And he can't help the biting fear that if he *does* ask, he'll rock the boat, ruin everything.

It seems like it's the right answer, though, simple as it is-- because Steve smiles at him, broad and bright-- like he can't help himself.

"You hungry?" Steve asks. "Because I fully intend to stuff my face and then pass out until 10-- or until Dustin wakes up and radios me."

He squints at Billy, head tilted. Touches his fingers to his chin, brief and fleeting, and then cranks off the shower, his voice echoing around them a bit.

“You look like you could use some sleep, too.”

It’s the *too* that keeps him from getting defensive. And when he looks at Steve, he sees the dark circles that sometimes find themselves a home on Steve’s face. Like Steve has an on and off again relationship with sleep.

“Food sounds good,” Billy says.

-*-

He hadn't mentioned anything about sleep, but that doesn't stop him from flopping down next to Steve in his big fluffy bed after breakfast. Billy kisses syrup from Steve's lips and lets his head fall back on the pillow, sinking into the slow pull of sleep.

He wakes up to the familiar sound of radio static and buried deeper into the warmth surrounding him, arms around something close that he pulls even closer.

The crackle of the radio, of Dustin Henderson’s voice, is enough to stir him. To remind him just who is shifting in his arms, tucked up close, and grumbling.

He cracks open a lazy eye long enough to see Steve fumble a hand over his nightstand and snatch up the radio-- not pulling away from Billy. His voice is rough and low with sleep when he presses down on the receiver.

“Fuck off, Dustin. I’m still sleeping.”

“Perfect! That’ll give me plenty of time to bike over!”

Steve groans. “Dustin, no. Dustin?”

There’s no answer. Steve sighs and tosses the radio to the carpeted floor and rolls to tuck himself back against Billy.

Billy wants to fall back asleep. He wants to fold himself back into Steve's comfort. But he can't, not with Dustin on his way over. Not with the way consciousness is now nudging him awake.

But Steve looks warm and comfortable. Billy waits for him to lie there for a moment, waits for his breathing to even out. Then, Billy slides himself from between the sheets and lays a soft blanket over Steve's bare shoulders.

He steals clothes that are a little too tight and makes his way downstairs to explore the empty house, to make himself at home.

Because he doesn't want to wake Steve, because the guy always looks so *tired*, Billy camps out on the front step with a cup of coffee and a dog-eared novel he found on a shelf. The door is mostly closed behind him, keeping the cold air in and the noise from outside, out.

That's how Dustin finds him.

He rolls up and kicks off his bike, face pinched the second he sees Billy's Camaro-- and then Billy himself. He pads up, backpack slung over his shoulders, and stops with his hands on his hips in front of Billy.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, eyes narrowed, wary but not angry.

Billy looks slowly down at his book, and then at his coffee. Then, he looks back up at Dustin like he's stupid. Or a little slow. "Are you blind, or…?"

Dustin huffs, then makes a wild gesture toward the house towering behind him. "Yeah, but *here*? Are you and Steve, like, hanging out?"

Jesus, this kid is stupid. It's going to give Billy a headache -- or it would, if he wasn't in such a good mood.

"Does it look like we're hanging out?" Billy gestures to the front step, at the absence of Steve Harrington from his current situation.

"No," Dustin says, dragging out the word, and he crosses his arms over his chest. "It looks like you're hanging outside of Steve's house, wearing Steve's clothes, like maybe you forgot to bring any spares, and I'm pretty sure Steve's passed out somewhere in there while you're waiting for him to wake back up so you *can* hang out."

Yeah, well. Maybe the kid isn't all that stupid after all. Not that there's a *giant* leap there or anything, so.

“What, do you want some coffee, or something?” Billy asks, instead of saying anything else. He gets the sneaking suspicion the kid isn't just going to fuck off like Billy’d like him to.

Dustin’s face brightens considerably. “Sure,” he says, and plops down next to him. “But Steve usually mixes in hot chocolate packets for me so it’s not too bitter.”

“Well, Steve's asleep and I don't actually like you, so,” Billy says.

He sets down the book and stands, tossing a “stay” at Dustin before slipping back through the door to grab coffee from the kitchen.

He does put a little sugar in it, though, as a hasty afterthought, before going back outside and thrusting the mug into Dustin's hands. Dustin takes it, eyes it for a second, and then takes a sip. His nose scrunches up, but he nurses it as they sit there. Billy opens up the book and tries to ignore the way Dustin keeps looking at him.

“I don't suppose I could pay you to leave, could I?”

Billy's jeans are inside, his wallet with them.

But he'd really like this kid to stop *looking* at him.

“I could be persuaded,” Dustin says. “Could probably even convince the guys and Max to ditch bugging either of you today. But only if you give me a good reason. And ten bucks.”

“Because King Steve needs his beauty sleep,” Billy says, though he knows that's not going to be good enough.

“That might keep me from pestering Steve for a few hours, but not a whole *day*.” Dustin says, sipping at his coffee again, making the same face every time.

“Jesus, swirl the cup a bit. There's sugar at the bottom, idiot.”

Billy thinks about it. He's certainly not going to out Steve or himself

to this dweeb -- he doesn't know how much this kid knows.

“How about I make it twenty?” Billy says. “And I don’t beat your face in.”

It's an empty threat, clearly. They both know it.

“Do you promise not to beat *Steve's* face in?”

“Don’t really think that’s on my agenda,” Billy says, taking a sip of his coffee. “So, sure: I promise not to beat Steve’s face in.”

“Deal,” Dustin says, then holds out a hand. “That’ll be twenty dollars.”

Billy pauses, halfway through a sip of coffee. He pats his grey shorts and smirks.

“Wallet’s inside.” Unfortunately, it’s also on the floor of Steve’s room. “How about I owe you.”

“I can wait,” Dustin says.

“Ugh, *fine*,” Billy says, pushing himself off the steps. “I'll go get your cash. Jesus.”

Billy slips into the house and shuts the door behind him with a click. He pads up the stairs, quiet as fucking possible, and then lets himself into Steve's room.

All of the quiet, all of the careful steps, are useless. Steve’s awake, sitting up in bed, slumped against the headboard with his elbows on his thighs. His head’s hanging between his shoulders, and at first Billy thinks he’s crying, until the creaking door has him looking up.

The smile he gets is a sleepy one. “Oh. Hey.”

He’s not crying, but he still looks tired. Billy’s going to have to try harder to tucker him out, clearly.

“You should go back to sleep,” he says, instead of anything concerned, or worried, or whatever.

He pads over to his jeans and picks them half up, fishing his wallet out of them to slip out a twenty. When Steve gives him a look, Billy just shrugs.

“I’m paying Dustin to fuck off and get out of our hair.”

It seems stupid, now that he says it out loud. Like he’s trying too hard.

Steve’s eyes go a little wide, and he tosses the blankets aside-- and really, it’s not fair, all that skin-- and he gets up to pad over to his closet. “I didn’t realize it was already so late in the morning.”

“*Hey*,” Billy says, starting forward toward Steve. “Go back to sleep. It’s not like there’s anything going on today.”

“But *you’re* up,” Steve twists to face him, says it so fast that Billy’s brows fly up, and Steve’s face colors a little. “I mean, I can’t just leave you to putter around my house. It’s rude. And who’s gonna watch the idiots--?”

“I was drinking coffee and going through all your shit,” Billy says. “I obviously can’t do that if you’re awake.” Billy shrugs. “Besides. I was paying Dustin to get *everyone* to fuck off. So you’re off babysitting duty for the day.”

Steve falters, head tilting. “And why would you do something like that?”

Billy just shrugs one of his shoulders and folds his twenty in half. And then half again. “You were sleeping.”

“Yeah, I was.” Steve nods, and he shuffles forward a step. “And when I woke up, I thought maybe you’d left.”

That -- throws Billy for a loop.

He didn’t think Steve would care. He didn’t think that it was even a possibility. He -- didn’t think Steve would even fucking notice.

Billy’s heart skips a beat.

“Nah,” he says. “I didn’t leave.”

“I noticed,” Steve says, and his eyes drop to his own shirt stretched over Billy’s chest, his own sweats low on his hips, and then to the twenty he’s got folded up between his fingers, before looking back up. “Go bribe Dustin away. I’ll give you a ten for your trouble.”

Billy smirks. Sure, he could probably use the ten -- but he’ll take another form of payment. After all, he doesn’t know how long he’ll have this, how long he’ll be able to get his hands on Steve.

“How about another kiss?” Billy says, taking another step toward Steve.

Steve eyes drop to Billy’s mouth as his own lips part. “I can do that.”

He closes the last bit of space between them. All that bare skin, warm even through the cotton of Billy’s stolen shirt, Steve’s hands on his waist as he leans in. It’s perfect.

Steve’s mouth is better. Languid and sweet. There’s a hint of tongue, at Billy’s upper lip, and it makes him groan for more-- but then Steve’s pulling back, grinning as Billy sways a bit closer.

“You just said one,” Steve says, hands sliding up to his chest, keeping him from dipping in for another. “You could’ve asked for ten.”

Billy would whine, but he’s got at least *some* control. Instead, he just huffs out a breath and twists his lips into a frown. “Mm,” he hums. “Guess I’ll have to find something else to occupy my mouth with, huh?”

“Probably,” Steve says, but Billy can feel him shudder. “But not until Dustin is gone.”

“Obviously,” Billy says.

He takes a step back and Steve’s hands slide away from him and drop back at his sides.

“I’ll go get rid of the kid,” Billy says, and lumbers back outside to thrust the bill in Dustin’s face. “Alright, now scram, shithead.”

“Took you long enough,” Dustin huffs, dusting off his shorts as he stands and takes the twenty with a toothy grin. “Thanks, asshole. See you guys tomorrow.”

And then he’s gone, kicking off on his bike and wheeling down the street, probably to head to Wheeler’s. Billy watches him go, just to make sure he’s actually going, before gathering up the mugs and his stolen book and stepping back inside.

In the kitchen, he fills his own mug back to the brim with coffee, and gets a new one for Steve, and makes his way back upstairs. When he finds his way back to Steve’s room, Steve has unfortunately put his own pair of sweats on. He’s got his feet tucked up under himself on the bed, and he eyes the extra mug in Billy’s hand with a hungry gaze.

“Tell me that’s for me,” Steve says.

Billy’s eyes widen as he looks down at the mugs, one in each hand. He raises them up and then toes the door closed behind him -- old habits die hard; even though the house is empty, he can’t just leave the door open.

“What? No, both of these are for me. You have to get your own.”

But he sits down on the edge of the bed and passes the mug over anyway.

Steve takes it with eager hands, clutches it close, and holds the warmth against his chest. It’s hot outside, but the Harrington house is kept *cold*. The warm mug must be a relief against his bare skin because Steve shivers and hums.

“Thanks,” Steve says, giving him another one of those smiles that’s bordering on lazy. “I’m very glad I ran into you this morning, now. If it’s gonna get me coffee hand delivered to my bed.”

“You know, I would’ve thought you’d be *more* grateful for the blowjob,” Billy says. He sets his coffee down on the bedside table and lets himself fall backwards onto the bed. “You sure know how to make a guy feel loved, King Steve.”

Steve bounces a bit with the movement, eyeing him as he sips at his coffee. “What were you doing out that early anyway?”

“Felt like getting out of the house,” Billy says, staring up at the ceiling. He gets the strange feeling Steve's answer is similar.

Steve hums. Billy hears the sound of the comforter rustling, feels the mattress dip. Hears the dull *clink* of porcelain against wood.

Then Steve is sprawling out next to him, their shoulders brushing. Their fingers, too, between them and at their sides.

“And now you’re hanging out in mine,” Steve says.

Billy rolls to the side, just to see Steve's face turn back up toward the ceiling with a smile. Like maybe he was looking at Billy but was caught out. Not that he seems too sorry about it.

“It's a little more fun here, I think. Even though the company is --” Billy hums, letting his palm lie flat on Steve's stomach. “-- well, it might leave something to be desired.”

“Oh, really?” Steve huffs out a laugh, the muscles of his stomach contracting with it, head lulling over again. “Sorry, Hargrove. I’m the only company you’ll find rattling around this place.”

“I figured,” Billy says, fingertips idly tracing over soft, hair dotted skin. “Or you wouldn’t’ve been as calm about an early-morning blowjob on your stairs.”

He doesn't say *it must be lonely* or *how lucky* or anything else. If anything, he kind of envies Steve the space he has to rattle, to not have to step on eggshells.

Steve shivers under his attention. His hand snaps down, catching Billy’s wrist and stilling his touch. Then, he spreads his palm out over the top of Billy’s hand and presses it flat to his skin. Shudders and closes his eyes and just breathes.

“It’s certainly not how I expected my morning to go,” Steve says.

“That would've been a little presumptuous, yeah,” Billy says, though

he wouldn't have minded at all. Maybe it would've even been nice to know Steve was thinking about this, about imagining them.

Steve smiles, eyes still closed, and then he looks at him. “I hardly even know what to presume with you.”

“I'm easy,” Billy says with a grin. “An open book.”

He knows he's not, but Steve makes him feel like one, with the way he's always looking. Always laying Billy bare.

“Nah,” Steve shakes his head, twists a little, and then freezes when Billy keeps his hand flat over Steve’s abdomen. “I would’ve thought you’d punch my teeth in at the party. Instead, you hit on me.”

“Well,” Billy says. “I didn't *really* hit on you. I told you some other guy was hitting on you, and then I put my tongue in your mouth because you dared me to. But, *semantics*.”

Billy drags his hand down a little bit, fingers playing with Steve's happy trail. Then, he teases under the waistband of his sweats, just a bit.

“This? This is me hitting on you.”

Steve’s skin jumps like it does when Billy touches him sometimes. Like he’s starved for it. Maybe he is. Billy hasn’t exactly seen Steve do much more than flirt; it’s not like he’s out on the town with a date hanging off his arm every night.

Eyes flitting between Billy’s, Steve threads fingers through his, wordless permission on his face.

“Oh, yeah?” Steve asks, and his voice shakes a little. “You gonna give me the full Hargrove heartthrob experience?”

“Well, my dinner and a movie money was just spent on getting us the day together, so.” Billy shrugs.

He might have played his hand a little too much there, but he doesn't really *care*, and he can't bring himself to. Instead, he slips his hand, with Steve's over it, underneath the waistband of Steve's pants,

fingers trailing over the sensitive skin of his not quite hard cock.

“You'll just have to make do,” Billy says.

Steve’s jaw goes loose. He gasps into the space between their faces and shifts, hips flexing a little.

“You don’t have to,” Steve says, but he’s already shaking a little, vibrating with want; it’s lovely.

“Yeah,” Billy says, a little slow, a little sarcastic. “I'm doing this because I *have* to.”

Not because he likes watching the look on Steve's face when Billy gets his fingers around his cock. Not because he likes the little sounds Steve makes when he's already out of breath.

He works over him slow and steady. Keeps the pace easy, even if Billy is on the edge of need, too. Watches Steve arch as their hands work beneath the loose material of his sweatpants.

Billy could watch him for ages. The way his brow creases, the way his jaw works like he’s biting the inside of his cheek to hide the noises he makes behind his teeth. The way his skin grows flush, grows warm, as he shifts under Billy’s attention. As he writhes for Billy.

It’s better like this, up close, feeling the length of him against his palm. Getting to watch his mouth fall open as he gasps for breath. Watch his throat work as he presses his head back against the bed.

“Billy,” Steve says, and Billy can feel his cock twitch in his hold, can feel his fingers flex between his. “*Christ.*”

There's something easy about the moment, something more delicate than pushing between Steve's legs on the steps. It's nice, having Steve's hand covering his own, makes it feel more real, somehow. Billy doesn't know.

But he does know that he's burning up, that he can't keep his eyes off Steve's face. Can't stop watching him break apart, piece by small piece.

“God, you're so good, baby. Look at you,” Billy says, looking his fill.

Steve's stomach contracts, his face twisting up, and Billy watches a blush bloom over his cheeks and bleed down his neck to his chest. He catches the beginning of a whine, but Steve strangles it back and, with the hand that had fisted in the comforter, covers half his face, his eyes, like he's hiding.

It's hot -- and it's also *adorable*, which is a fully dangerous thing to realize, Billy thinks.

But he eats it up regardless, happy for the show, thankful for this small glimpse underneath the covers of who Steve is, how he presents himself.

Billy speeds up a little, just to wring another little noise out of Steve, other litany of breathy pants as his hips twitch and his body starts to squirm. He strains wonderfully, up into the stroke of Billy’s palm, muscles tight under his skin. And then he shakes back down, gasping, and his knees fall open, sweat starting to shine on his skin.

“Billy,” he breathes, and his cock is weeping in his and Billy’s combined grip; there’s a wet patch on the soft cotton of his pants and it slicks the drag of his hand over hot skin. “*Billy*.”

Billy could work him hard and get him to spill over fast into his fist. He could. It would be so easy. It would probably be the right thing to do, here, where the rules aren't stated and Billy's just *teaching*, not *indulging*.

But instead, he finds himself pulling his hand back and batting Steve's away. He finds himself crawling over Steve's legs and easing his sweats down over his hips. Billy drinks the sight of him in -- and then dips his head to get Steve's dick back in his mouth, unhurried. Lazy. Just to taste him, just to feel the press of his thick cock over Billy's tongue.

Steve grunts like the breath has been punched out of him. Both his hands go to Billy’s shoulders, fingers digging into muscle, and he curves up trembling beneath him. He clutches at him, and when Billy presses his tongue up under the sensitive head, he gasps out and

flops back again, shifting on the bed beneath him like he might try and wiggle out from under Billy's weight.

But Billy's not going to let him go anywhere.

Hell, he paid twenty bucks to get some time alone today, just to spend some time with Harrington. He's damn well going to indulge a little. Make sure Steve enjoys himself.

So he goes slow, doesn't even bother to pick up the pace. Just rolls his tongue over Steve's length, tasting him. Savoring him.

Steve's moan shudders through him. Wells up from somewhere in his chest and comes breathlessly up and over his lips as he pants beneath him. The sound of it is heady and blissed and delicious. Billy wants another.

Blunt nails dig in at his shoulders, drag, and raise the skin there. Steve pants out a curse, a garbled mess of *jesus, fuck, Billy, what are you even doing to me?*, and arches up. His back bows, tremors rippling through him, and his hips buck sharply as Steve keens.

Sure, Steve could come. Billy could let him. But Billy wants to see him break apart at the end; he's greedy for it.

He's *hungry*.

He smooths his thumbs over the bones of Steve's hips, applies a little pressure, and presses Steve firm against the mattress while taking him impossibly far into his mouth.

The cry it earns him, the way it practically rips out of Steve's throat, is absolutely gorgeous. Steve squirms, breath coming in catches and stalls, and he bats at Billy's shoulder with a clumsy hand-- the same way he'd hit at Billy's knee, nearly a month ago, at the pool when Billy held him and worked stubborn knots out of his back.

He thrashes a little, and Billy can feel the way he strains under him, the way muscle and bone shift under skin while Billy holds him steady. Feels the way his legs kick out a bit, trapped under Billy's thighs, and the way his nails bite in again at his shoulders before a hand moves to fist back into Billy's hair, tugging.

“*Billy*,” he whines his name, cock pulsing against Billy’s tongue, and his head thumps back against the bed. “Billy, *please*.”

But he doesn’t say *stop*.

And Billy's got a lot of patience, alright? He could do this for hours, if he fully intended to.

Maybe he should. Maybe he should work Steve so hard that he passes out afterwards and actually gets some sleep. And maybe Billy’ll stick around to see it, just so Steve doesn't wake up alone again.

Billy just hums and slows down.

Which is a little difficult, considering he wasn't even working Steve all that hard to begin with. Eventually, he eases his mouth off entirely and gets his fingers around Steve's dick, dragging them over the slick and sensitive flesh.

He licks his lips.

“You alright there, pretty boy?”

Steve’s jaw is tight, his head thrown back, and he shudders up into his touch. “I’m gonna-- *fucking* destroy you, later.”

Well, that sounds like a good time.

“Promises, promises,” Billy says, and gets his mouth back on Steve's dick.

“*Fuck*,” Steve actually *whimpers*.

He flops against the bed, goes boneless. Helpless. Gasps in breath after breath as Billy teases.

“C’mon,” he hisses, tugging at Billy’s hair again. “*C’mon*, Billy, *please*.”

Yeah, no. Not if Steve is going to keep begging him like that. Why wouldn't Billy want *more* of that?

So he takes his time, letting the minutes drag by with Steve being increasingly mean to his scalp.

It's only when Steve makes a choked off noise, the loudest whimper yet that sounds awfully close to *tears* that Billy even thinks about relenting. So he thumbs over Steve's hips again and sucks a little harder, head bobbing and lips stretched obscenely around Steve's dick.

It's worth it. The way Steve sobs out in relief, the way he trembles hard beneath him, makes it all worth it.

"Yes, yes, yes, Billy--" he chokes on his own words, moaning, shaking and straining up beautifully for him. "Don't stop. *Don't stop*."

This time, Billy doesn't.

He grips Steve by the hips and works him over. Still not *fast*, not *hard*, but he doesn't slow the pace, either. He just keeps going until Steve is shaking, until he's crying. Until those fists hurt so good in his hair.

It doesn't take much more than that, which tells Billy exactly how strung out Steve is. That just a *little* more is enough to get him there, fast, and push him over the edge Billy's been holding him at.

When Steve comes, it's without warning and far more visceral than it had been earlier that morning. He sobs out, hands dropping to claw at Billy's shoulders-- marks Billy will wear with pride, later-- and seizes up under him as he spills out into Billy's mouth.

For a second, Billy thinks he stops breathing while his orgasm crests and crashes through him. Thinks he was right when he hears Steve suck in ragged, wrecked gasps as tension finally bleeds out of him.

The best part is how Steve looks after, sated and happy and so perfectly spent. Billy watches him as he comes up, licking his lips and swallowing.

"So," Billy says. "That twenty bucks was worth it, I think."

Steve is too dazed to reply for a second. Like bliss knocked the words

right out of his mouth. Like he's still swimming out in the deep end, and Billy might need to drag him out again.

He strokes up his sides with careful hands, just in case, and watches Steve blink up at him.

Steve shudders under him and then slides his palms up Billy's arms, to his shoulders, soothing over angry red lines and craning up to catch his mouth is a lazy, open-mouthed kiss. Tugs him down and hums against his lips.

When he feels Steve move, legs shifting under him, it's slow. Like Billy's attention had knocked him loose and too easy. Like he was still coming down from a fantastic high. It fills Billy's chest with heat, with a buzzing warmth, and then Steve's thigh is pressing up against the hard length of his own cock, Steve's sweats still half down his legs, tangled up and catching.

The best part is that Billy hadn't even realized how hard he was. He's been focused solely on Steve, on wringing every last ounce of pleasure out of him. But now -- now it's impossible not to notice.

Billy groans with it, into Steve's mouth, and let's his hips rock down against Steve's thigh.

Jesus, he hasn't ground up against someone like this in ages, when they *could* be touching him. And yet -- there's something about it that Billy likes. The indulgence of it, maybe. The laziness.

Head falling back, Steve pants up at him, eyes warm and dark as his hands smooth down to his chest, then around to his back and down lower. He anchors a heel onto the bed, gives Billy something firmer to work against, and gasps as Billy rolls against him.

"So worth it," Steve says, tugging up the back of his shirt to splay his fingers out over the warm skin above the curve of his ass, urging him with shaking muscles.

"Fuck," Billy groans out, into Steve's mouth, shuddering a little with each roll of his hips. "You're -- way too hot."

It's true. No one should get Billy like this, loose and easy and pliant.

He shouldn't be so turned on just by Steve's hands on his back guiding him down, but he is. Dear god, he is.

Steve laughs, breathless and bright eyed, and his hands slip down under his waistband to curve over his ass and urge him down harder against his thigh. “Don’t cream your pants, Hargrove.”

Yeah, except Billy feels like he's gonna.

Especially with Steve's hands on his bare ass like that, squeezing and guiding, and so goddamn warm. He chokes out a noise and buries his face in Steve's neck, instead. Bites at the flesh there.

“Then don't --” he groans, “don't fucking *make* me.”

But he can't stop the way he grinds down with a huff, with a whine. Can’t stop the way he sinks his teeth into Steve’s skin, savoring the way it makes him shake under him and choke out a cry of his own. Can’t stop himself from bucking when it makes Steve’s fingers curl, the blunt edges of his nails digging into the swell of his ass.

“Thought I--” Steve moans as Billy rocks down harder, twitching and oversensitive when he brushes against him. “Thought I couldn’t *make* you do anything?”

“God,” Billy pants, open mouthed and gasping. Fucking *wanton* as hell. Like he's greedy for it, like he can't get enough of Steve's fingers on his ass -- which, fair, he *can't.*

Steve grins, delighted and wicked, and Billy has to kiss the look right off of him. Licks past his teeth and into his mouth, ruts down as he fucks past Steve’s lips with a deft tongue; earns another one of those shaking moans, earns Steve’s fingers flexing over his ass and then pulling him down more.

He tugs Billy until their pelvises meet. Until Billy is grinding against his hip, Steve’s own spent cock pressed to him, and Steve is panting out whines into his mouth that Billy swallows down, eats up, hungers for.

Steve breaks away, face turning, and he pants to the side, Billy’s forehead touching to his temple. Steve trembles, throat working

around a whimper, and then he squeezes at firm, flexing muscle and bucks up.

“C’mon,” Steve breathes, hot and wet in his ear, and there’s a hint of teeth. “C’mon, take what you need.”

It makes Billy rut down harder. Makes him rock and jerk, Steve’s body, Steve’s bed moving under the motion of it. Steve gasps each time, like Billy’s knocking the breath out of him, and one hand slips free of Billy’s sweats to slip up and into his hair, fingers curling there as he holds on for the ride.

“God, Billy. C’mon. Give it to me. Come for me.”

Billy can't help but imagine *more*. Imagines fucking Steve into the bed like this, buried deep within him. Imagines riding Steve's cock, too, just like his, Steve telling him to *take what he needs*.

He comes hard, aching cock sliding against Steve's soft length, through his sweats painting the inside of them in slick warmth. His hips slow down, shuddering, as he drags his dick through his own come, gasping against Steve's mouth.

The first thing he says is *fuck*, which he repeats again and then *again*, as pleasure hits him in little aftershocks.

Jesus, Billy thinks. He hasn't come in his pants in *years*.

Steve slumps under him, apparently happy to take Billy’s weight as he rests against him. They’re both breathing heavy, and Steve pets through his hair and eases his other hand loose to smooth up his spine.

“That was fucking perfect,” he says.

“Didn't exactly *teach* you anything,” Billy says.

Other than how to thoroughly embarrass Billy Hargrove.

Billy gives himself another couple seconds of panting against Steve's neck before he pushes himself off to the side and sprawls out on his back. Taking up space like he wouldn't prefer to cuddle into Steve's

warmth. That seems -- wrong. Like he's pushing his luck.

Next to him, Steve wiggles. He kicks off his pants, until he's bare on the bed, and then props himself up onto his elbows, chest still rising and falling with his heavy breath.

"And here I thought you were teaching me how to properly hit on a guy," Steve says, and when Billy looks, he's grinning down at him-- though, there's something a little plastic about it. "Guess I need to be a little more *hands-on* next time I'm trying to get laid."

Billy -- doesn't like the idea of Steve getting hands-on with anyone except for Billy.

He clenches his teeth and breathes out, slow and steady.

But he doesn't want to blow his chance at this.

"First lesson. Kiss someone stupid after you've given them a killer orgasm, huh? My mouth is lacking too much tongue right now."

Something sharpens in Steve's eyes. Something glinting and a little dangerous. That glass look that could cut. That one he gives Billy sometimes that makes him quake.

Steve surges into motion. Rolls and throws a leg over him, until he's straddling his waist, back curving as he catches Billy's jaw between his hands and kisses him long and hard and slow.

It's all teeth and tongue. He bites at Billy's lower lip. Slides his tongue into the heat of his mouth. Sucks when Billy's tongue meets his own. Feeds off of the groan Billy's rewards him with.

It's not at all what Billy expected, especially after getting Steve off, after burning all that energy out of him. But he's not complaining, not in the slightest.

His body surges upward, meeting Steve with the same energy. Reflecting it back onto him.

"Fuck," Billy groans into Steve's mouth, pulling his arms around Steve's midsection to pull him impossibly close. "God," he murmurs

against Steve's lips, trying to catch his breath. "I was supposed to tire you out."

Which, you know, maybe he wasn't actually planning on *telling* Steve. But Billy's a little stupid right now, a little dumb.

Face framed between Steve's palms, Billy presses forward into his touch, into another long kiss. Tightens his arms around him. Only relents when Steve pulls back to graze his teeth against the edge of Billy's jaw.

"Takes more than that to tire me out," Steve says, and Billy's not sure if it's a lie or not. "Have I kissed you stupid, yet?"

Billy thinks about it. He thinks about Steve kissing him all day and still doesn't think he'd be done with it.

"Not quite yet," Billy says, and presses up again, catching Steve in another long kiss.

-*-

It's two days before the fourth of July, and Billy is back at the quarry. It's more crowded today, like everyone decided that the pool shutting down wouldn't stop them from escaping the oppressive heat of July.

There's music playing from someone's radio, some pop heavy station that makes Billy rolls his eyes behind his aviators, but otherwise there isn't much to complain about. He's in the shade of a big tree, on Steve's big ratty blanket, lounging back and watching the water.

And Steve's *in the water*.

Billy had rolled up with Max and found him hip deep, had panicked for a fraction of a second, thought maybe that Tommy or one of his other friends he'd seen around the bend of the quarry had knocked Steve in and he'd have to fish him back out. But Steve had seen the sunlight glint off of the Camaro, smiled, and waved-- before Dustin tackled him from behind and took him down.

Billy had thought Steve was terrified of drowning. Apparently, Steve

was more afraid of pools. Billy doesn't quite know what to make of that-- he knows there's a story there; itches to dig into it.

He watches Nancy Wheeler squeal as Mike and Steve team up against her. Watches her duck behind Jonathan, who looks more uncomfortable wading in the water than Billy feels looking at him. Watches Steve toss Will at Jonathan, who catches him, and then beats a retreat out of the water, breath heavy, water rolling off of his skin, smile wide.

Watches Steve pad up to him and remembers spending the entire afternoon mapping out that skin with his mouth. When his swim shorts ride high enough, Billy can even make out a few lovebites on his thighs. He remembers that wide eyed, glorious look Steve had given him when, after some sleep and after some food, Billy had crawled into Steve's lap and taken the both of them in hand. Remembers how Steve had kissed him after, grinning when Billy had blinked at him, and muttered something about *lesson one*.

Now, Steve flops down onto the blanket next to him-- not touching, but in the distance of it-- and buries his head in a towel.

Billy takes a minute to stare overtly. Makes it real obvious that he's looking at Steve, even taking a second to swipe his tongue over hips lips.

Like he's hungry.

And he is, kind of, even though he's been snacking on cherries for the last little while.

He turns his head and spits out a seed that he's been rolling around on his tongue for a little while, gumming all the flesh off of.

"Want any?" Billy asks.

Steve finally peeks up at him, face still half lost in his towel, hair still up everywhere. He eyes the carton in Billy's hand, and then his gaze locks on the red that has stained his mouth.

Raising himself up onto his elbows, Steve reaches out and steals one. "Thanks."

Billy watches as Steve bites into one, slicing some of the flesh off with his teeth before popping the whole thing in his mouth. His tongue darts out and licks some of the juice away. Billy can't stop watching.

It's probably bad, getting this caught up on Steve Harrington -- but that's just where Billy's at.

"Water nice?" Billy asks.

He has no intention of going into the quarry water. A pool? Sure. The ocean? Even better. The *quarry*? Absolutely not.

Steve hums, licking some red away from his thumb, tongue already stained like wine. "Colder than usual. But we had a long winter."

Billy huffs. "You're telling me. This place is a hell hole in the winter." He pauses, considering, and then continues: "I mean, it's a hell hole *all* the time, but the winter's worse."

Billy was built for long summer days and ocean breezes. He wasn't built for flat plains and endless weeks of snow.

Turning over, Steve props a head up on his hand and steals another cherry with the other. "Unfortunately, I'd have to agree with you. I like winter, I like the snow, and Hawkins is where I grew up, but… yeah. Pretty hellish. And you don't even wanna know what goes bump in the night."

Billy laughs, even though Steve seems serious. The guy's weird, sometimes, the way he goes so stoic, so sincere. And then, the next moment, in the blink of a goddamn eye, he's palling around with the kids again, calling them losers and laughing alongside Billy.

"What, do the lonely housewives here turn into creatures of the night?"

Billy flops back onto the blanket and looks up at Steve.

"Something like that," Steve says, and he lets a blatant look trail down over Billy's chest, over the lines of his abdomen, and then back up.

Their little corner of shade is quiet. Quiet enough, anyway. Billy drops his voice and grins, slow and wide. “Like what you see, Harrington?”

Steve’s mouth curves into a grin, and he bites into a cherry. “I thought that would’ve been obvious.”

“Mm. Might need more convincing,” Billy says. “For now, you can share.”

He eyes the cherries, head turned ever so slightly toward them. Then, he lets his mouth fall open a bit, tongue rolling out. Waiting.

Steve blinks at him. He glances over his shoulder, at the kids in the water, at his friends, at the people all around them not paying them any kind of attention.

When he looks back down at Billy, there’s something warm in his eyes. It makes Billy shudder, makes his fingers curl, and then Steve is plucking up a cherry for him and offering it up at his fingertips, placing it on Billy’s tongue.

Billy takes the cherry into his mouth, letting his tongue lap at the tips of Steve’s fingers before he pulls away. He eats the fruit lazily, staring up at the blue sky through the trees, occasionally tilting his head a bit to instead stare at Steve’s drying torso.

Eventually, Billy moves to spit out the pit.

“You missed Tommy H and Carol,” Billy says after a little while, stretching out just because he can. “Saw them for a second. Figured they went out to the woods for a quick screw.”

“Probably,” Steve says. “They’ll fuck just about anywhere. Caught them in my backseat once-- made the asshole pay for a detail wash.”

“I would’ve made him clean it myself. And then made him pay me.”

Billy *would* say something about how they get it on like rabbits -- but he can’t really *blame* them. If he could, with Steve, he probably *would*.

Steve laughs. “I don’t trust his cleaning skills. You ever seen his room? It’s like a bomb went off and then he jizzed all over it.”

Steve laughs again when Billy makes a face. He plucks up another cherry, bites it in half, and in the warmth of day juice rolls easily over his fingers as he offers it out.

“No, I’ve never seen his room,” Billy says. “Jesus, why would I ever go into his room?”

Billy pushes himself up on his elbows, surging up to meet Steve’s hand so he can take the rest of the cherry from Steve’s fingers, making sure to get Steve’s fingers while he’s at it. Wouldn’t want to waste any of the juice.

Those dark eyes get darker. Billy feels Steve’s thumb *press* just slightly against his tongue as he sucks it clean. Billy grazes his teeth against the pad of it as he pulls away.

He sees a shudder ripple its way up through Steve. Sees his face grow warm. Sees him twist back onto his belly, and grins with all his teeth when Steve half hides his face in the fold of his own arms.

Billy barks out a laugh. He knows that look. He’s starting to be able to read Steve, to be able to guess what he’s thinking. And right now? It’s not difficult at all -- Billy’s got him a little hot under the collar.

“You alright there, baby?” Billy asks, all smiles.

“Shut the fuck up,” Steve huffs, pressing his cheek to his forearm; the tips of his ears are even red. “And don’t call me that.”

He doesn’t sound like he means it. His voice is too breathless. He likes it too much.

Billy wonders if he’s hard.

For a moment, Billy thinks it could just be that the sun got Steve all pink, warming him with a nice blush. But he doesn’t remember Steve looking like this, doesn’t remember him being this flushed.

“You don’t care when I call you that when my hand’s on your --”

A shout stops Billy in his tracks. It’s a playful noise, the shout of one of the kids -- or another group of kids, Billy can’t tell -- but it still gets him to stop. To look around at their surroundings and bite at his bottom lip.

He startles when fingers touch to his wrist. Just the tips, sliding over his rapid pulse, and then away again.

When he looks back, Steve is watching him.

“No one’s looking. No one cares.” He says, but his voice is a hush, like he knows Billy might spook any second. “But if it bugs you, you don’t have to do anything. Not ever. I’m pretty familiar with secrets; I know how to keep them, if that’s something you’re worried about.”

Billy is reminded, rather abruptly, that he *doesn't* know Steve. Even if he can predict the guy a bit, he doesn't know if Steve can keep a secret. He doesn't know that. Even if Steve promises him. Even if he means it sincerely.

And Steve doesn't know how much it matters. How much Billy needs this secret kept. At least just until the end of the summer, when Billy can move out of Neil's and never look back.

But he doesn't say it's important. Because that's not how Steve phrased it.

If it bugs you, like it's just some quirk. A personal preference. Not life or death.

It makes Billy's stomach drop a bit. Puts him a little on edge.

“I'm a kinda personal guy,” Billy says.

“Okay,” Steve says, slow, brows coming together-- Billy realizes his shoulders are tense-- and he blinks a few times before turning back over and sitting up, pulling away from him, putting some distance between them. “Well. Done deal. I haven’t told anyone, and I won’t. And I’ll keep my hands to myself-- at least, with you.”

He wiggles his fingers a little, as if to prove it.

But Billy's caught up on his words. *At least, with you*.

"Yeah, alright," Billy says, teeth a little clenched.

His tongue tastes bitter now, the earlier sweetness long gone. Steve's fingers twitch, like he wants to reach out anyway.

Worse, a shadow joins the tree's over them, and when Billy looks, it's to see Chris beaming down at them like an overgrown puppy. Instantly, Billy wishes Steve hadn't pulled so far away.

"Harrington, Hargrove." He greets with a little nod. "What the hell are you two doing over here, when there's booze over there?"

He gestures with a jut of his thumb over to where most of the others have gathered, closer to where the cars are parked, music and laughter pouring over the water and filling the spaces around them. Billy watches Steve look, watches him grin like the idea is more of a wistful memory than something he's actually entertaining.

"Thanks, man." Steve says. "But I'm driving."

"At least come over and stop hiding," Chris says. "We didn't get to finish catching up. You had something you wanted to talk to me about, didn't you?"

Billy's jaw goes tight. His teeth snap shut.

He lifts himself up again on his elbows and looks at Chris, all grin. All unfriendly teeth.

"You'd *think*," Billy says, "that if Harrington, here, had something to tell you, he already would have."

Both Steve and Chris blink over at him. At the hostility in his voice, in his bones, in the sharp line of his teeth.

Chris frowns, crossing his arms over a big chest, hands on his biceps. "I *think* I'd rather make sure he doesn't myself, thanks."

Billy's everything is sharp, but he keeps his posture relaxed. Cool. Like he isn't ready to snap into a fight at every given second.

“You'd *think* you wouldn't be trying this hard, but clearly you'd be wrong.” Billy smirks. “Stop embarrassing yourself.”

“Listen, man, if you’ve got a problem with me, just come out and say it.” Chris says, and he takes a step forward, muscles bunching under his skin. “I’ve laid bigger assholes out for less.”

“*Hey*,” Steve snaps, and Chris deflates a bit, shuffling back again, and Steve pushes to his feet. “Chris, as great as it is to catch up with you, I’m good. Nothing more to talk about.”

Billy feels a deep, thrumming satisfaction zip through him.

Right up until Steve glares down at him. “And Billy? Go fuck yourself.”

He marches off, in the direction of the parked cars, leaving Billy there on the blanket by himself.

Billy looks up at Chris with a sneer, trying to ignore the way Steve's words had felt like a punch to the gut.

“See? Look what you did,” Billy says.

“What *I* did?” Chris scoffs. “Pretty sure he stormed off because you were being a dick and trying to pick a fight.”

Billy purses his lips, looking up at Chris. “A fight? Nah. Wouldn't be any fun. Looks like you could've taken me three years ago. Now? You might want to start cutting back on the beer.” Billy’s eyes drop to Chris’ waist with a smirk. “Lotta calories.”

“I don’t know what the fuck your deal is, but I’m not dealing with it.” Chris says. “Have a good day, Hargrove.”

And then he’s walking off, back to the small party the other idiots are starting, leaving Billy with boiling blood and nowhere to burn it off.

Billy waits two minutes without moving. Just trembling in place with rage. He pulls out a cigarette, smokes it. Then, another.

Then, he pushes himself up from the blanket and stalks over to where

the party's at.

He finds Chris almost immediately. Before he can even start looking for Steve.

“Amigo,” Billy says.

Chris turns, beer in hand, and he frowns. “What the hell do you want--?”

Billy's fist connects with Chris’ face before he can even think about it.

Nearby, someone shouts, a loud and delighted whoop. Probably Tommy, who always loves it when Billy goes feral.

The pain in his knuckles blooms as he watches Chris stagger back, taken off guard. It's fucking beautiful. It's addictive.

But then he’s catching himself, hand at his jaw, beer long gone. But then he’s swinging too, and his fist connects, and Billy’s head explodes under the force of it.

He falls back, kicking up dirt and that's it -- they're going at each other like animals. Fists flying and curses spitting. The pain is so good -- he's never felt so goddamn alive. Every time he lands a punch on Chris’ face, it's like a gift. A reaffirmation of something he doesn't even know.

He’s laughing, teeth bloody, as Chris lands another hit that lays him out. As his breath heaves out of him, as he stumbles to his feet, he hears Max scream his name.

But his blood is pumping, thrumming, *singing* in his veins. Drowning everything else out-- the people, the noise, the churning in his gut-- until it’s nothing but the fight.

He gets another two hits in, gets Chris’ brow bleeding and his eye swelling, before there are hands on him and tugging him back. Pulling him hard and slinging him off of his feet and face first into the wet dirt.

He shoves himself back up, teeth bared, and he moves to take

another swing-- only coming to a stop when he sees Steve. Steve, who's breathing heavy like he ran over when the kids went to get him. Steve, who makes his blood sing in different, better ways. Steve, who's standing there with dark eyes and a warning on his face and in his shoulders.

Billy stumbles. Starts.

Stops.

Someone's holding Chris back, too, which is good, because Billy's an open target now. Undefended and unprotected. If Chris took a swig, Billy would go down hard, eyes and focus solely on Steve.

His gut twists painfully. Drops. He *hates* the look on Steve's face and knows it's just for him.

He spits blood onto the dirt, gives one last look to Chris' face, and then stalks back to the blanket, ignoring all of the noise that kicks up the *second* he starts walking away.

Max is at his side once he's far enough from the scrap. She pads along next to him, quiet and careful, and doesn't ask anything stupid.

He knows it was her. Knows she's the one who got Steve, begged him to make Billy stop probably. Knows that she's probably the only one who knows enough about him to use something like that against him.

When he collapses down onto the blanket, feet folded under himself, Max cracks open the cooler and tosses a cold bottle of water at him. He catches it and stares at her.

"For your face," she says, arms crossing, and get haze darts over to the crowd, to the party, to her friends who are more subdued in the water.

"Thanks," Billy says after a long moment.

All he can hear are distant sounds, blood still rushing through his ears, adrenaline still ramped up. Everything is haywire, everything is *wrong.*

He doesn't say *sorry, I shouldn't have done that,* because Billy's life is a list of shit he shouldn't have done, fights he shouldn't have picked.

There's blood on his hands, on his tongue, on his breath. Everything smells like iron, tastes like regret.

When Max asks *why*, Billy just shrugs.

Max huffs. "Well, at least no one's unconscious. You good?"

He looks over at the party, at where everyone seems to have picked up right where they left off, at where Steve still is -- arms crossed, talking to Chris who Billy thinks has a beer pressed to his eye -- and then looks away again.

He doesn't give Max an answer, so she lingers. Hovers until Lucas calls for her. Waits until someone else walks up.

"Go on, Max. Go have some fun."

Steve. Steve is standing there, at the edge of his own blanket, arms still crossed, smile tight and fake on his face. Steve is not looking at him.

Max nods before stepping away, giving Billy one last look before running back off to the water.

Billy should say he's sorry. He should say he didn't mean to. Instead, he says nothing. He just leans back, lets himself fall onto the blanket with the water up against his face, pain like fireworks in his muscles and in his bones.

He should *go*, Billy thinks. But he's a little dizzy and Max is back in the water. So, he doesn't move.

"You need a hospital?" Steve asks, still standing, still not looking at him.

"Nah," Billy says.

He's not even sure where the blood is coming from. But he doesn't *feel* like he needs the hospital. He's only ever gone, like, twice. And

those times were *bad*.

“Does he?” Billy asks, knowing he doesn't.

As much as he doesn't want to admit it, Chris is bigger. Stronger. Even without all of Billy's rage to back him up, Chris punched harder.

“No,” Steve says, and breathes out slow, careful, deep; he finally looks away from the water, eyes landing on Billy, flitting over bruises that are already starting to blossom under his skin. “You planning on picking another fight?”

Billy rolls his shoulders, like he's shrugging into the blanket, and tries not to wince.

The worst part -- the *best* part -- is that he already did pick one. If he goes home like this, it'll only fuel the fire inside his father. He laughs, because it's a little funny -- losing two fights in one day.

“Are you asking me if you're safe? Because I thought it was pretty clear I'm not looking to punch you again.”

Ever.

“I’m asking if you’re planning on getting into another fight,” Steve repeats, tone clipping, voice like ice-- but his eyes are burning, daring-- and then he’s dropping to his knees next to Billy, knocking the bottle away with his knuckles, and catching Billy’s wrist when he startles because the look on Steve’s face is suddenly and acutely *terrifying*. “Because if you are, I’m right here. You wanna hurt someone? I’m right fucking here.”

Billy's has a lot of practice in not backing down. He's had a lot of practice keeping his guard up. It should be easy, to sneer and to posture and to push at Steve until he gets up and storms off. It should be so easy.

Instead, with Steve's hand wrapped tight and hard around his wrist, Billy feels a bit like he's breaking. Like he's crumbling.

Like he's let Steve down, which he knows he *has*. And there's nothing he can do about it, either.

Billy just goes still, freezing at Steve's touch. Posture loosening, breaking down. He goes slack, like the only thing holding him up was the rage.

And now it's gone.

Steve's grip eases. He stares down at him, as Billy breath goes shallow, and then nods his head slow and lets go.

"Okay," Steve says, soft, and he plucks up the bottle and presses it to Billy's cheek for him. "Okay, Billy."

He doesn't know what that means. He just knows he wants to close his eyes and press into Steve's touch.

But Steve skirts his fingers when he reaches up to hold the cold press of the water to his face. Pulls back and rocks away, to sit back with his arms draped over the tops of his knees, staring at him and not touching him.

He doesn't know how Steve can see right through him. Doesn't know if he likes it or not.

But there's relief in his mouth, at the back of his throat, as Steve sits there with him.

"You feel like that again, you come to me." Steve says.

After a while, Billy has to swap out the water bottle with another cold one. He shifts on the blanket again so that he's sitting, legs flopped to either side so that his knee just *barely* touches Steve's hip. It's not a lot, but it's enough. It's steadying.

"Okay," Billy says eventually, after Steve has probably already forgotten the offer. After all of the commotion has died down and Billy's slow bleeding has stopped. "Okay, I'll come to you."

Billy knows that he'd be lying to himself if he said Steve wasn't part of the problem in and of itself. He'd be lying and he'd be hopeful, too. He doesn't *want* Steve to be a part of the problem, doesn't want Steve to be anything, really. Instead, he's a complication. A wrench in the machine.

But -- Billy trusts him. Doesn't know why, doesnt know where it came from. He knows Steve should be livid, should have thrown a punch at Billy, too. But he didn't.

He didn't.

So, Billy has hope. As naive as it is.

Maybe Steve can be a problem and a solution, all wrapped up into one.

-*-

"This kinda blows," Max says, tagging along behind Billy as they make the trek to the fairgrounds to watch the fireworks.

Billy's made her carry most of the stuff -- since it had been her idea, her needling him into it -- and her small arms are laden with blankets and snacks and whatever the hell else she wanted to bring. But she's not complaining, because both of Billy's eyes are black *and* he's carrying the cooler full of drinks, which is probably about as heavy as she weighs.

So.

He's helping.

And she's helping him.

It's always best to get out of the house on special occasions. If Neil has the day off, he starts drinking midday and powers on through till evening; it never ends well. He's already exploded once at Billy this week, for coming home with bruises all over, face aching and sore -- Neil's already worked up, already worn Billy thin. And Max had provided an out. An easy solution.

"Yeah," Billy says, shifting his shoulder so the cooler pulls a little bit less.

Jesus, did they really need *that* many bottles of knockoff Squeeze-it? How much sugar could one group of kids drink?

Back in California, they had watched the fireworks from the boardwalk. Watched the colors bloom and blossom into a clear sky, vibrancy reflected in the rolling waves beneath while salt air whipped around them. They had gotten funnel cake and eaten shaved ice and things had been good, between the two of them, before Hawkins. Before everything.

Watching fireworks on a field in the middle of nowhere doesn't really compare.

But it's better than being in the house, better than being cooped up with Neil, with Max and her silent hovering.

"Have you talked to Steve?" Max asks.

Billy can see where they're heading, away from his parked car, toward a large mass of people already camped out on blankets. Little specks, getting larger.

"No." Billy shrugs. "I mean, kind of."

Billy had seen him yesterday, in passing, after dropping Max off at the arcade. Steve had gotten a look at him through the window of his car and had frowned. Then, he'd come over, had leaned on Billy's window and said, *that looks way worse than yesterday*.

A shrug had been a good enough answer. Or the best one Billy could come up with, anyway.

Steve's brow had furrowed, but he had stayed. They hadn't talked much then, but it was enough. Enough for Billy to know that while he maybe wasn't forgiven, at least Steve wasn't livid.

"I don't know what that means," Max says. "You're worse than a girl, sometimes. You know that?"

"Are you saying I'm dramatic?" Billy says, unable to stop himself from smiling, just a little. Dusk is encroaching fast, though, so he hopes she can't actually see.

"You are like, the most dramatic person I know. Oh -- hey, look, it's Lucas! And Dustin, and everybody else --" she waves and they wave

back.

Her little legs start going faster and Billy lengthens his strides to keep up, refusing to *run*. He's not a loser.

When they get to the little gathering, though, Steve isn't there in the *everybody else*. He spots Wheeler and her creepy boyfriend, but not Steve.

Billy sets the weight of the cooler down as Max whips out their own blanket. She's already chattering away with Mike and Lucas, her eyes wide and eager as Mike tells her something in hushed tones, looking way too excited about something.

He looks around and doesn't see Steve anywhere.

"He's doing a favor for Hopper," Dustin says as he sidles up next to him, bouncing on his toes. "Steve, I mean."

Billy shouldn't ask. He knows better. But he opens his goddamn mouth anyway.

"Is he coming tonight?"

"Yeah, he's just picking someone up. Hopper's gotta watch the fireworks, make sure nothing goes wrong like last year-- they all went off at the same time, it was *crazy*-- so Steve's bringing her along for him." Dustin says.

Billy nods. "Well, here's to hoping that happens again. Maybe this thing'll actually be fun, then, huh?"

Sure, he could go looking for Tommy and Carol, or anyone else, but instead, Billy plops down on the blanket next to Max and pulls out one of the stupid sugary juice drinks. *Chucklin' Cherry*, the bottle proclaims. Billy takes a long sip of it and coughs, not expecting the terrible rush of syrupy sugar that hits the back of his throat. It's nothing like the cherries from the other day, but it's not necessarily *bad*, either.

He lights up a cigarette and looks up at the sky, zoning out for the most part, letting all the voices fade into the background, trying not

to pretend that he's just waiting around for Steve.

It's well after dark, and the kids are playing with sparklers Wheeler pulled out of her purse, a few lanterns lighting up the field in patches, when Steve finally arrives. Billy only knows because Mike drops his sparkler while it's still lit and Wheeler curses at him as he takes off, ambling past Billy to the two figures walking up with flashlights in their hands.

He turns to look, sees Steve standing there in the low light, with a girl at his side. Sees Mike scoop her up into his arms and frowns.

But Steve is smiling, even if it's thin and he looks pale in the dark, and then everyone else is running over, too.

"El!" Dustin screeches, running up and wrapping his arms around both of them, even as Mike makes a face. "You made it! The fireworks should be starting soon."

"Steve told me," the girl, El, says. "I don't know what that means."

"You'll *love* it," Mike assures, tugging her over, past Billy and toward where the kids have claimed their own blanket, and Steve pads up with Dustin lingering next to him, flicking off his flashlight as Wheeler and Byers greet him.

"Hey," he says, but his voice sounds off, tight, and he stops next to Billy. "Surprised to see you, here. Pretty sure there's a bonfire rager going on by the water, tonight."

"*That's* where everyone is," Billy says. "Went scoping for parties and couldn't find anything. Had to settle for this, instead."

Truth be told, he didn't hear about it at all. But he's been avoiding pretty much everyone for the last couple days, so word had never gotten to him.

His cigarette is long gone, but the juice is still there, sitting in his lap, between his legs. Billy leans over, digs another one out of the cooler and passes it up to Steve. "You want some liquid sugar?"

Like maybe he can bribe Steve into sitting with him.

Steve huffs out a laugh and plops down. The kids are busy minding their own business, chattering away at one another, and while Wheeler glances their way with curious eyes, she doesn't coax Steve over to her and Jonathan.

"I've got one better," Steve says, reaching behind himself and pulling out a flask from his waistband, uncapping it and holding it out.

Billy takes it and tips back a sip before passing it back. The liquid burns his throat, rich and flavorful and nothing like the cheap shit he normally drinks. "Damn, Harrington."

Steve laughs again, another breathy and half strained thing, tipping his head back and taking a hefty mouthful for himself before capping it again and taking the juice. "Thanks, I think."

"Makes my chaser look bad," Billy says, taking a sip of fake cherry. He nods at the kids, at the girl he barely recognizes, but can't say he's never seen before. He's maybe caught sight of her one or two times, just in passing. "Who the fuck is that? *Another* one of your babysitting crew?"

"Something like that. She's Hopper's kid. Jane. The kids call her El. It's a middle name, or something." Steve says, shrugs, and tips his juice toward the scarce light. "*Groovy Grape*? Seriously?"

"Are you saying you're not groovy enough for *Groovy Grape*?" Billy asks.

He lets his hand fall to the blanket, brushing Steve's thigh as it goes.

It makes Steve jump. Makes him suck in a breath so sharp, Billy's surprised he doesn't choke on it.

He goes to pull back, but Steve stops him, his hand falling over Billy's in the dark. He leaves it there, for just a second, and breathes out slow before pulling back again until just the edges are touching.

"Sorry," Steve mutters, uncaps his flask and knocks back another drink, voice low after he swallows. "I fucking hate it out here in the dark. Fucking trees every goddamn where. Can't see shit. Makes me jumpy."

Billy's seen Steve jumpy before. But he's never seen him at night like this, surrounded by trees. He's always at a house or the arcade, or even at a diner.

He wonders if it's hard, since Hawkins is pretty much wilderness everywhere. Trees, woods -- nothing, surrounding everything.

Billy smiles a little, feeling at home in the darkness. "Don't worry, pretty boy, I'll protect you."

Steve snorts. "Can you even see with those black eyes you're sporting?"

Not nearly as well as normal, but Billy just shrugs. "I've never been better."

Stupidly, Billy moves to rest his hand over Steve's. Lets his fingers fold over Steve's, hidden in the small dip of space between them. Even if anyone saw, it would just be the kids. And they're all going ape-shit over *El*, so.

Steve hums, dubious. But his fingers twist under Billy's, catching and curling, and then holding tight.

"What happened to being a personal kinda guy?"

"It's dark," Billy says. And he likes the darkness, but Steve clearly doesn't. "And you're jumpy as hell."

He looks like he could use a good tether. And just because Steve offered to be Billy's, when he needs one, doesn't mean that it's just a one way street.

The smile he gets is a little more easy. Even in the night, Billy can see the way it softens Steve's face a little. Can feel the way his thumb ghosts over the back of Billy's hand.

"This is for me, then?" he asks.

Billy leans back, lets himself fall backward so he can look up at the sky. So that he can look up at Steve. He keeps their hands tucked between them, just shifts a little so Steve's hand is pressed up against

his side, too.

“I mean, it’s not *entirely* altruistic. I’m a self serving kind of guy,” Billy says.

Steve hums again, like he doesn’t quite believe him, like he thinks Billy is nicer than he is. He shifts, untucks his legs, and rolls back so that he’s propped back on his elbows, legs splayed out and knee bumping into Billy’s.

He looks like he might say something-- but then there’s a *pop* of noise, a *hiss*, and then light scatters across the sky. Steve startles, fingers going tight in Billy’s, and he looks to the sky as the kids coo and awe over the beginning of the show.

People are still filing in, late for the festivities.

They should stay, Billy thinks. But they also could easily sneak out.

“Hey, wanna go to my car?” Billy asks. “Or there’s like, some buildings and shit over there.”

Steve blinks over at him. “The last time I was in your car for any extended period of time, I had a concussion and your step-sister nearly gave me a heart attack. Think it’ll be better this time?”

Billy rolls his eyes, even though he knows Steve can’t see it. “I promise it’ll be way better. Jeez, King Steve, your expectations of me are *so low*.”

Absolutely deservedly so, but still.

“Not a hard feat, *way better* than seven stitches and a fractured nose,” Steve grins, but Billy feels him jump again when another *pop* of sound goes off. “Lead the way?”

It’s dark enough and there’s enough commotion that Billy can stand and lead Steve out of the mass of people without much worry. Besides, they could be going for a smoke, or to get high, or whatever. Billy’s honestly more unnerved by the way Steve keeps jumping than his own hangups right about now.

Billy parked off near the side, away from other cars -- partly because he didn't *want* to park near anyone, for fear of his car being damaged, and partly because he hadn't known where all the good spots *were*.

Now, he's thankful for it.

"Still trust me to keep you safe?" he asks, once they make it to the car, darkness all around them.

Steve's hand is clutching at his. Billy can feel him shake a little, can hear his shallow breath over the shower of sparks going off in the sky.

When Billy turns to look at him, Steve's eyes are wide and earnest on his face. "Yes," Steve says.

Billy leans in to kiss him, because it's a good answer but it's not the *right* answer. Jesus, there is no world in which Steve should trust loose canon Billy Hargrove. He should never -- and yet, he does.

It's a chaste thing, just a quick moment of their lips working together before Billy pulls back and digs into his pocket for his keys.

"Think I can distract you enough," Billy says, "that you won't even *notice* we're out here at night."

Steve stands there, quiet, as Billy unlocks the door and slides the seat forward so they can crawl into the back. It's only once Billy's ducked in, pulling Steve in after him, that Steve says anything.

And that's only after he's caught Billy by the front of his shirt, tugged him forward with the door shut behind them, and kissed him stupid. "I think you can, too."

He's pressing between Billy's legs in the cramped backseat, hands shoving up under his shirt, and Steve's *frantic*. His mouth is hot and sweet against Billy's jaw, but his hands shake, like if he doesn't keep touching him, doesn't *do* something, he'll end up locking up and jumping at every little thing.

It's dark in the car, darker than outside, and Billy can barely see Steve. He can just feel his hands, and they're *all over*. He hadn't been

expecting it, honestly. If anything, he had expected Steve to be more subdued, had expected that it would be Billy all over him.

“Hey,” Billy says. “There’s no rush.”

But he’s not complaining. Steve gets his mouth around Billy’s pulse point and he can’t help but groan into the silence of the car, *surprised*.

He follows it with his tongue, and then with his teeth. Kisses down the line of his throat, palms hot as they slide down the flex of Billy’s abdomen. Then, he’s plucking at Billy’s belt, tugging it open before going for his fly.

“I need to not think,” Steve breathes against his skin, shoving Billy back by the hips and half dropping into the well at the foot of the backseat, face pressing to Billy’s stomach. “I just need to focus on you. Just you.”

Billy thinks about healthy coping mechanisms, about ways of dealing with stress and fear and anger in a reasonable fashion -- and then he thinks about this, about Steve’s hands on his skin, tugging at his pants in the cramped back seat of his car.

He can’t say no. He doesn’t *want* to.

“God, *yes*,” Billy says, fingers snaking into Steve’s hair as Steve works him out of his briefs, already hard, suddenly aching.

Outside, another firework explodes in a flash of light. It fills the cab of his car with red. Highlights Steve’s face, where he’s crowded between his legs, cheek pressed to his thigh, breathing heavy and eyes screwed shut.

His hands are firm at Billy’s hips. His fingers flex and then relax, and then Steve blinks up at him.

“Tell me if I’m doing this wrong,” Steve says, and then his mouth is on him, lips wrapping around the head and tongue pressing up as one of Steve’s hands drops to the base of Billy’s cock.

Like there’s a *wrong* way for Steve Harrington’s mouth to be on his cock.

Billy lets out a breathy moan before he can think better of it, before he can even be embarrassed. His fingers tighten in Steve's hair, slowing him down a bit just so that Billy can savor it. So Billy can commit every press of Steve's tongue to memory.

"Fuck," Billy groans. "Jesus, you're so good."

Steve lets out a muffled sound around him. Billy feels it more than he hears it, his dick surrounded by sinful heat, a slick tongue working against the underside of his cock. He feels him suck, feels him try and take him deeper, only to back off when he presses himself too far. Steve's hands smooth over him, head bobbing slow as he tries to find a rhythm, and fingers curl over his thigh as a palm slides up under his shirt to rest over Billy's stomach as he breathes.

There's not much finesse about it. It's obvious, when Steve presses himself too far and doesn't know his own limits, or when he pulls back to catch his breath, that it's not something he's used to.

But it's good. It's *so good*. It's wet and it's hot and Steve works him over in the dark like it's all he wants to do.

Billy wants it to last for forever.

He keeps his hips from bucking, not wanting to ruin Steve's first time doing this, but it leads to Billy squirming slightly, shifting under the press of Steve's hand on his stomach. It feels so good, being underneath Steve's attention like this, being the focus of it.

His tongue is hot and his mouth is slick and warm, and it's all Billy can do to keep himself quiet when Steve squeezes him a little, at the base, while teasing his head with the tip of his tongue. Another *pop* and a shower of light lets Billy see him, lets him see the pretty picture of Steve between his legs, and it's almost enough to get him right to the edge.

But Steve pulls off gasping and scatters kisses against Billy's hip, stroking over him with spit and precome easing the way. "Talk to me. Lemme hear you."

He kisses up his shaft. Teases at sensitive skin with lips and tongue.

Laps at the head of him and then wraps his lips back around him.

Like *that's* gonna help Billy come back from the edge.

"Okay," he says, voice wavering. Rough. For all of his talking, usually, he's not all that much of a talker in bed. Always a little too ashamed. Sure, he'll say shit here or there, but never a ton. Usually just curses.

But for Steve -- for Steve, he'll fucking do anything.

"Okay," Billy says again, finding his voice. "Slow -- slow down a little, baby." His fingers tighten in Steve's hair, coaxing him into a slower pace. "If you keep up like this I'm gonna -- *fuck* -- come down your throat in like, two seconds flat."

Steve shudders. Takes him as far into his mouth as he can like that's what he *wants*, and then eases off again when Billy tugs a little. Steve moans, soft and warm, around him. But he lets Billy pull him, guide him off, until he's just resting against the tip of Steve's tongue and the full bow of his lower lip, feeling him pant heavy and wet against him.

There's something heady about that too, the thought of Steve open like that for him, a syrupy sweetness in the forefront of Billy's mind, overpowering and as inescapable as the fake cherry juice they'd had earlier.

"God, baby," Billy says, fingers light as they comb through Steve's hair. "Your mouth is fucking perfect. *You're* perfect. So good at this."

Steve huffs out a sound, his fingers curling over the base of him and stroking up. Taking the weight of his cock in hand so that he can place a kiss to the head.

"I'm hardly perfect," Steve says, and takes his time kissing along the underside of him until he twitches.

Billy finally lets his hips buck, unrestrained, once Steve's mouth is off him again, squirming underneath his hand, gasping at the little kisses and the stroke of his fingers.

The whine that escapes his lips is truly embarrassing.

“You are -- *jesus,* you are,” Billy pants. He wants to last, *god* he wants to, but he misses the heat of Steve’s mouth, feels tortured with these little teasing touches. “*Please*, Steve. Baby, please,” Billy begs.

Steve licks back up the length of him, tongue hot and flat and *so fucking good*. There’s a flash of light, a hiss of noise, and Billy sees Steve’s dark eyes for a moment, highlighted in red.

“Fuck my mouth,” he breathes, kissing under the crown of his cock. “I’ll give you what you need.”

And then his mouth is around him again, cheeks hollowing, lips red and wet and stretched in an obscene depiction of sin.

“*Baby*,” Billy pants out, but he doesn’t even have the ability to form other words, to get anything else out.

Because then Steve is moving, and Billy fists his hands into his hair. He’s careful, more so than he would be with anyone else, when he lets his hips rock against Steve’s lips, when he guides him by the hair into a careful rhythm. But he’s a little firm with it, too. Taking control, but still knowing what Steve can and can’t take.

Pleasure finds him fast, the whole situation hotter than it has any right to be. Steve’s lips, his tongue, his mouth, work Billy up quick, bringing him close to the edge.

“I’m gonna --” Billy warns, giving Steve a second to pull off if he wants to.

Steve doesn’t pull off. He presses in closer, takes him deeper, until his throat protests and Steve groans around him.

Tells him exactly what he wants without a single goddamn word.

Billy doesn’t need anything more to push him over the edge -- that’s it. It’s so goddamn hot, so goddamn overwhelming. The pleasure washes over him in waves, his fingers tightening in Steve’s hair, hips shaking and bucking underneath him.

All while Billy's blabbering out stupid, sappy shit. Calling Steve *baby*, calling him *perfect*, calling him *so good, so fucking good.*

Steve takes it. Gags a bit, but swallows him down as he spills out, even if he pulls off gasping and stroking Billy through the aftershocks, even if he wipes his chin off with the back of his other hand, catching saliva and what his mouth couldn't as he shudders and works Billy back down.

He shifts between Billy's legs, rises up a bit, and kisses at his stomach where his shirt had ridden up. He pets over his hips as he shivers. He presses his face there and breathes.

"Thank you," he mumbles.

"Should be thanking you," Billy says, hands running through Steve's hair.

The fireworks are still going on outside, but they seem so quiet in comparison to the sound of Steve breathing.

"C'mere," Billy says, trying to pull Steve up a bit. "Wanna kiss you. Wanna get you off, too."

Steve shudders again, beautifully, with want. He crawls up onto the seat properly, slides into Billy's lap, and keeps his head low so he doesn't brain himself.

Dipping down, he catches Billy's mouth with his own, lips tender and warm. He tastes like liquor, like sugar, like Billy.

It shouldn't be as hot as it is.

Nothing about Steve should be as hot as it is.

Billy moans into his mouth, licking himself from Steve's tongue. He loops his hands around to Steve's ass and pulls him close, so he's straddling Billy, so he's as pressed in tight as he can be.

Wasting no time, Billy palms him through his jeans. Steve's hard under his touch, and his hips lurch wonderfully forward as he gasps out against Billy's mouth. It's followed quickly by a whine, needy

and saccharine, and Steve ruts against his hand as he takes Billy's face between his palms-- terribly, fantastically careful of any bruises.

And jesus, that's the kicker. Because Steve's too good, *way* too good for Billy. Billy kisses him, hard and deep and a little needy, too. Even if it hurts, just because he can't not.

There's something about working Steve through his pants, about feeling the length of him confined under worn denim. Something about the way Steve squirms over Billy's lap and whines against Billy's lips. He's so easy to tease, so beautiful, lit up by the occasional flash of fireworks.

Steve pulls away gasping, hips rocking in slow, shuddering motions. Rolling to press into Billy's touch, a hand moving up to brace against the roof of the car.

Billy wonders what it would be like to watch Steve ride him like this. To lean back and let him work himself in lazy motions, just to share the pleasure of it.

"You tryin' to make me come in my pants, Hargrove?" Steve asks, breathless and still moving.

"God, that'd serve you right," Billy says. And it'd be hot as shit, too.

But it would also be messy. And as much as Billy would love for Steve to not be able to stop thinking about him -- he doesn't necessarily want Steve having to walk around with come in his pants for the rest of the night.

So, Billy grabs him. Loops his arms around Steve and turns, pushing Steve back and lowering him down with strong hands so he's belly up on Billy's back seat. Spread out like a cramped feast.

"This is me being *kind*, I'll have you know. Purely fucking selfless, here," he says, unbuttoning Steve's fly and edging his cock out after pushing his pants down.

Billy wraps his fingers around Steve's length and shudders at the feel of him, loving the weight and the thickness in his hand. Loving the

way Steve arches up and shudders back down with a low moan.

He bucks into his touch, clutches at the edge of the seat above his head, and spreads his thighs. "I'm not gonna last long," he says.

"That's fine," Billy says. "Wanna see you come for me. Wanna taste it."

If they were in Steve's bed, he'd spread him out and take his time. As it is, they're in the tiny backseat of Billy's Camaro, hiding from the world. So, he dips his head down and gets Steve's cock between his lips. He sucks, licks, *pulls*, tasting all of him, letting Steve fill his mouth.

Steve wasn't lying. He doesn't last long.

Billy barely has to touch him. Just strokes him a few times, takes him into his mouth, and then Steve is shattering apart beneath him--crying out and bowing up, muscles winding tight as his orgasm rocks through him.

Billy swallows him down, hums around him like Steve is delicious, like he's that expensive liquor straight from the flask. Eventually, Steve's shaking hands pull at his hair, urging him up from where Billy's lapping at his spent cock, just delighting in the way Steve twitches and shudders beneath him. He pulls his lips off and smacks a wet kiss to Steve's hip bone, delighting in the way the world lights up blue, then gold, then red.

"You're perfect," Billy says, pressing out another kiss, licking sweat from the divot of Steve's hip. "Fuck."

Steve is breathing heavy into the cab of the car. His fingers are steady through his hair, even as they tremble.

When Steve laughs, Billy looks up at him.

"We fogged the windows up," he says, still grinning, and he reaches up to drag his fingertips against the condensation.

Billy has the stupidest urge to draw a goddamn heart on the window with his fingertip, like some lovesick girl. Instead, he reaches up and

pulls his fingers through the same lines Steve made, settling for something like a compromise.

After a minute, Billy shifts, needing a little space to stretch, a little space to be less cramped. His body is still a little sore from the other day, bruises rearing their ugly heads to announce their presence. He tucks himself back into his pants in the dark.

“So, was I a good distraction?” Billy asks, unable to help himself from being genuinely curious.

Steve hums, pulling himself onto the other side of the backseat, stretching a bit and adjusting himself. “Definitely. Was I?”

“The best,” Billy says.

He wants to close the gap between them, wants to lean against the window and pull Steve against his chest. He wants to *cuddle*, like that’s a thing that he even does.

It’s crazy. It’s stupid. It has Billy bridging the gap between them to kiss Steve again.

“Not that I needed one,” he says, against Steve’s lips. “But I wasn’t gonna complain.”

Steve steals another kiss before Billy can think about pulling back. He shuffles closer, over the seat until they're pressed together.

“What are you doing after this? Going to the party?”

Billy takes the movement for the invitation it maybe is. He shifts closer, dips his head down so he can press his lips against Steve’s neck. Not doing anything, just getting all up in Steve’s space. His warmth. His scent.

“Not sure. Don’t really have any plans.” He hadn’t really been planning on heading home, back to Neil and his temper.

“Well, if you want, you can come over to my place.” Steve says. “I have zero plans outside eating leftovers and watching shitty reruns.”

Billy doesn’t even wait before he makes an affirmative noise against the skin of Steve’s neck. “Do you have any ice cream in that giant freezer of yours? To go with that expensive whiskey?”

Steve laughs; Billy feels it against his lips. “What kind of babysitter do you think I am?”

“Rocky road?” Billy asks, looping his arms around Steve to actually pull him close, like he wanted to before.

Steve relaxes completely against him, a heavy warmth, his hands finding Billy’s in the dark. “And strawberry and vanilla. Though, if you eat all the rocky road, Lucas will kill you.”

Billy shifts, grumbling a little as he rearranges them -- sitting with his back against the window, pulling Steve to his chest, between his legs. It’s indulgent and idiotic, but Billy can’t help himself. It’s as compulsive as throwing a punch or hissing out a snarl, the way he pulls Steve to him and buries his face in his neck.

“So, I’ll buy him more,” Billy mumbles. “He can get over it.”

Steve laughs again. Billy doesn't know how he keeps making that happen.

He likes it when Steve laughs, though. Likes feeling his chest rumble under his hands, his back to Billy's chest, his head lulled over to make space for him. Likes the way Steve threads their fingers together.

“That'll probably work.”

“Obviously it'll work. I'm a goddamn genius,” Billy says.

He noses at Steve's neck a bit more, kissing as he goes. Just because he can, because he likes the way it makes Steve's breathing shift a little. Go a bit shallow.

“It's almost the finale,” Billy says, pulling Steve a bit tighter. Just in case the muffled noise getting more frequent through the car windows might spook Steve more.

Steve clutches at his hands and turns his face to Billy. Nudges at his cheek with his nose. Smiles when he meets his eyes, real and honest and raw with the way the succession of loud *pops* makes him shake a little, and then kisses him.

“Pretty sure the finale in here was better,” Steve says.

“You've got me there,” Billy says, and kisses him again. Long and slow, until the noise outside dies down, until there's silence.

They sneak out of the car and meander their way toward the field, Billy lighting up a cigarette as he goes, and passing another to Steve. They loop back to where all the people are, where everyone's talking, milling, playing.

Max finds them first. “Can I have a sleepover?”

Billy blows smoke to the sky and glances at Steve next to him. “You know that's not up to me. Did you ask your mom?” She nods. “Did you ask Neil?”

“You know he'll say no.”

“Damn right he will,” Billy says.

“*Billy, please,”* she says, like *Billy's* got any way to control Neil. But then again -- he's much better at dealing with Neil. More practiced.

“Fine. Look, I'll drop you off wherever it is you wanna go and you'll call and ask when you get there. I'll be right next to you so he knows I didn't just ditch you somewhere.”

“El's dad is the chief, too,” Max says.

Oh, Billy thinks. Oh, that might just work.

“He’ll *love* that.”

-*-

Chief Hopper actually *talks* to Neil, over the phone, reassuring him that Max is in good hands with his daughter and him. Tells him Billy

was real nice about dropping the girls off after the fireworks show. Tells him he'll drop Max off in the morning before work.

It's surprisingly easy. Billy talks to Neil when he demands it, says something about a party by the quarry, and Neil scoffs and tells him *if you get drunk, don't come home*.

Which, really, is all the excuse Billy needs.

Because then he's rolling up to Steve's house. Every light is on in the place, like it's Christmas, and Steve answers the door on the second ring, blinking like he's surprised Billy is even there.

“For a second, I thought you might ditch me,” Steve says, but he's smiling as he steps back and lets Billy in.

“Like hell I would,” Billy says. And then he grins, stepping inside and past Steve. “I mean, I've *seen* the showers in this place. I'm not gonna pass that up.”

Again, Steve's house is awful quiet. Like he lives here alone in this museum to a family that doesn't exist. It would be kind of sad, if Billy wasn't so jealous. If he wasn't so happy for the opportunity to get Steve alone, too.

Steve shuts and locks the door once he's in, then pads past him and toward the kitchen. “Well, I hope you don't intend to spend all night in there. You'll get pruny.”

Billy follows him into the kitchen and watches as Steve opens the fridge. He pulls out, like, five different tubberware containers and sets them in the counter.

“Pick your poison.” Steve gestures. “There's lasagna, casserole, I think some four cheese rigatoni-- unless you just want booze and popcorn and ice cream.”

“The latter sounds pretty damn good,” Billy says. Then, he inches a few steps closer. “I was planning on earning my time in the shower. That fine by you, King Steve?”

Steve turns to face him fully something warm and wanting in his eyes

as they flit down over Billy. “Guess that depends on how you plan on earning it.”

Billy knows he's not a pretty picture right now. He knows he probably looked better in the dark of the car. But Steve isn't recoiling, isn't looking away, isn't shying from him.

“All cards on the table, pretty boy. Whatever you want. We've got all night, right?”

“If you want to stay,” Steve says, in a breathless way that tells Billy he *wants* him to stay.

“Well, I'm not planning on going home.” Which is to say, very much and absolutely *yes*.

“Then, yeah.” Steve says. “We've got all night.”

But then his eyes flicker to bruises. To tender skin and muscle.

His lips purse up. “I'm not fucking you and risking hurting you while you're all black and blue. And you're not fucking me, either. Not tonight.”

Billy makes a face. “Well, that *was* the big plan, pretty boy.” Because it kind of had been. Billy had figured they had the time, they had the space -- and why not? “It’s not like you’re gonna hurt me.”

“But I might,” Steve says, and he steps closer, bare feet on the tile floor. “And I don't want to hurt you.”

He reaches up, tentative, and then takes Billy’s face between his hands. His fingers are careful as he tips Billy’s face into the light, and he brushes a thumb too close to a bruise.

Billy hisses.

“Not tonight.” Steve says, and he cradles Billy’s jaw and kisses him slow. “But soon.”

The pain is kind of refreshing, when given to him by Steve. But Billy gets it, he does. It’s not like he’s much to look at, right now. Not a

pretty picture for a first time with a guy.

“Fine, fine,” he murmurs against Steve’s lips. “Didn’t know you were so pushy.”

“Oh, didn't anyone tell you?” Steve asks. “I'm a king.”

Billy hums, fucking delighted. He closes the gap between the two of them, pressing his body flush against Steve’s. “How could I have forgotten?”

Steve kisses his mouth once. Then twice.

“I've no idea. Especially since you're the one that keeps reminding me.”

Billy walks himself backwards so that he’s pushed up against a wall, Steve in front of him with Billy’s arms looped around his middle.

“How am I supposed to earn it, then? You not losing interest in blowjobs?” Like hell Billy could lose interest in that, but he’s a little concerned Steve might.

Steve laughs. “Is that even possible?”

“Dunno,” Billy says. “You could be hard to please. I mean you are royalty, baby.”

“I'll have you know, I'm *extremely* easy to please.” Steve kisses the corner of his mouth. “All I need is you. Your hands. Your mouth. You.”

And doesn’t that just make Billy melt. It sounds like a line, especially considering what they’re doing, but he can’t bring himself to care right now. He just takes it for what it is, for the way it makes him go mushy inside and a little warm.

Billy catches Steve in a deeper kiss, a hungrier one. Something that expresses his sheer appreciation for what Steve’s just said.

Humming, Steve arches against him and presses in closer. His mouth is like sugar, lips and tongue sweet when Billy tastes them. The quiet

moan he gives is saccharine.

He shuffles in until their knees knock, using his body to pin Billy back. He could hurt him if he wanted, but Billy knows he won't. Knows Steve will touch him like he might break until Billy proves he won't.

“Maybe I like a little pain, pretty boy,” Billy breathes out, when Steve presses him more against the wall. There's a dull throb from his bruises but Steve is being so careful. So gentle.

It's frustrating -- and so goddamn sweet, too.

“Maybe I think you've had enough pain,” Steve says, hands curving under his ears, fingers lacing at his nape, kissing him slow.

Billy whines, because he just wants more. Because Steve is touching him but it's not enough. It's nothing like their frantic moment in the car, with Steve's hands and mouth all over him. It's a slow kind of heat, and it's got Billy burning up inside.

“Steve,” Billy groans. “You *know* I didn't come over here for your rocky road.”

Steve blinks and pulls back, a little *oh* on his mouth, like he's disappointed. But he nods his head and reaches for the hem of Billy’s shirt, tugging.

“Get this off, then.”

Billy bites his lip, eyes trained on Steve's face, on that little furrow between his brows. On the way his lips no longer have the little smirk that was there only moments ago.

So, Billy misstepped somewhere. He fumbled. Even though he's not exactly sure *where.*

So, Billy drops his hands to Steve’s and stills them. “Hey,” he says, a little confused. “You don't wanna see that.”

“Well, now I *definitely* do,” Steve says, but he doesn't move under Billy's touch. “How am I supposed to sex you up with all your clothes

on? It's what you're here for, right?"

There's something about Steve's tone that makes Billy go a little hard, a little tense.

"On second thought, I think I'll take some ice cream. You can play doctor later, how about that?"

Steve lets out a short breath and then pulls away, hands dropping to his sides, fingers flexing. "Okay," he says.

And then he's turning to the fridge, pulling out a tub of rocky road and strawberry. He sets them on the counter and then tucks everything else away before pulling out two bowls.

There's something rigid in the way he moves. Something that takes a second for Billy to recognize, but when he does, it's like a punch to the gut.

It's that same anxious, nervous way Steve was moving at the field. The same way Billy moves when he's home with Neil. The same tightness across the shoulders, in the jaw; the same tremble to the fingers.

Suddenly, Billy's not so hungry any more. And he certainly thinks twice about touching Steve.

He doesn't -- doesn't like Steve moving like that, like Billy could snap any second. It's way too familiar, way too close to the heart. And he doesn't know what he did, doesn't know how to fix it.

But he takes a spoon, and the container of rocky road, and starts heaping unappetizing spoonfulls of it into a bowl because he doesn't know what *else* to do.

"You know you can kick me out," Billy says, after a little too long of drawn out silence. "You're not like, obligated to house me if you don't want me here."

"I want you here," Steve says, looking at him, hand frozen in the middle of scooping out a healthy serving of ice cream. "I just -- it's just -- listen, I just assumed that you were -- well, I *thought* that you

wanted to hang out, relax a little, like a--"

Steve cuts himself off. His face goes as pink as his damn strawberry ice cream.

"But, um. If you just wanna get your dick wet, that's fine, too. I just thought… well, I'm not gonna kick you out or something. I'm just trying to figure out what you want."

Billy wants pretty much everything except for the ice cream in front of him. But he sticks the spoon in his mouth anyway and licks it clean, quiet and considering.

"I want to be here," Billy says, tentatively. "But jesus, Harrington, you look like I'm about to punch you."

"I know you're not gonna *punch* me," Steve snorts, but he looks back down at his carton of ice cream. "You might leave, though."

Billy doesn't know what to do with that at all. It's so brutally honest it kind of hurts.

"And what, sleep in my car?" And maybe, just maybe, he could match Steve on the honesty front: "Not that I'm -- just here for a place to crash. Look, I want to be here. And I'm -- not here just to *get my dick wet*, alright?"

Steve looks at him. Stares at him with those big eyes that always make him feel like an open book. Like Steve can read right through him, see the underbelly of who he really is, and he always expects him to turn away.

He never does.

"Alright," Steve says, and his shoulders go easy, and his smile turns a little sly. "You're not here *just* to get your dick wet."

Billy makes a face, puts on a grin to try and seem a little less laid bare. A little more comfortable.

"I mean you *did* already do that, so. I'm not exactly lacking. And I don't have any ice cream at home. *And* your showers much better

than mine.” He chews a little on his spoon, and then gestures with it. “And I *guess* the company isn't awful, alright?”

“That's high praise,” Steve says with a laugh, and then shuffles closer a step, hesitating only for a second before leaning in the kiss the corner of Billy's mouth. “So, ice cream and reruns and then we'll see what happens. Deal?”

Billy nods, pressing in for another chaste kiss.

“Sounds like a plan.” He pauses for a moment before continuing, “And look, if you *want* to play doctor I wouldn't say no to one of those packs of frozen peas I spied in your freezer, alright?”

“Thank fuck,” Steve sags a little and goes to pull the bag out of the freezer. “I thought I might have to force it on you. Or trick you into thinking it was some weird kink.”

Billy laughs, and it's a loose thing, something real and light.

“You're something else, Harrington. Jesus, that's for sure.”

“Shut up and take your peas,” Steve says, but he's smiling as he holds it out. “You need any painkillers? Weed?”

Billy takes the peas and puts them on the worst bruise, hissing when the cold hits him.

“Weed?” Billy grins, “I think I love you, Steve Harrington.”

And maybe that's a little truer than he'd like.

“Usually I'd say we need to smoke it outside, but my parents are spending the summer in Europe, so I don't think they'll notice.” Steve says. “Besides, it's dark out. We can't use the pool at night.”

Billy makes a face. “We can't?”

“No,” Steve says, firm and unyielding. “There's uh… problems with the lights. It's dangerous.”

Billy shrugs. He knows what fights to pick and which he’ll win.

Besides. Steve is offering weed -- so. “Let's do this, pretty boy. Get me high as a goddamn kite.”

“That, I can definitely do.”

-*-

They end up on the couch in the living room. Steve's got the good shit that makes Billy feel weightless, boneless, like his body has never known pain.

There's something droning on the TV, but neither of them are listening. The coffee table is a mess of food, chips and popcorn and a couple empty beer cans, as they pass a second blunt back and forth to each other.

Billy's never seen Steve high, but he's a talker. Mellowed out and slumped on the other side of the couch, feet tucked under him, telling him about how he and Tommy used to get high under the bleachers at school. How shit like that, like going to class baked, fucked up his chances of getting out of this stupid, small town.

How, now, he wouldn't want to leave anyway. He's got *responsibilities*, now. People counting on him. People looking to him to take care of them.

“I was never anything more than a rich boy with a pretty smile and some damn good head game,” Steve tells him, tongue loose, and Billy likes the sound of his voice, keeps asking him shit so he can hear him talk. “Like, okay, if I *died*, no one would've really given a shit, you know? But *now* -- now, I've gotta worry about shit like that. Joyce would *kill me* if I died. I'd never hear the end of it from Dustin. It's fucking weird.”

“Pretty sure you're not gonna *die*,” Billy says, a little unsure about where all this is coming from. Sure, he likes hearing more about Steve, but even Billy doesn't worry so much about *dying*.

“That's because it's good, right now. There's nothing running around eating cats.” Steve says, drags long and hard and holds it, before passing the blunt back -- Billy thinks maybe he's had too much. “I

think about it sometimes, though. Dying, you know?"

Billy bites his lip, confused, concerned, and absolutely without a goddamn clue.

So, he pushes himself up from his side of the couch, walks the few steps over to Steve, and flops down next to him. And then he wrangles the guy into his arms, crowding him down against the couch.

"You're not gonna *die*, okay?"

Steve laughs a little, but he's pliant beneath him. "Everybody dies, Billy. It's just a matter of *when*."

Billy knows that. Jesus, he knows that way too well. But Steve shouldn't. Steve should be safe and sound and happy.

Billy presses a kiss to his ear, like that'll *help*. Like he's any good at comfort.

He's quiet for a minute, before he asks: "Something was running around eating cats?"

"Yeah," Steve breathes, steals the blunt from between Billy's fingers and holds in to his lips for him. "But I'm not supposed to talk about it."

Billy takes a hit and something about taking it from Steve's fingers makes him dizzier than before. More weightless.

He's intrigued.

Billy's never met a secret he didn't want to know for himself.

Billy leans forward a little, kissing Steve, blowing the smoke back into Steve's mouth, his lungs.

He pulls back, his legs tangled endlessly with Steve's. "I'm good at keeping secrets," Billy says.

Steve arches a little beneath him, practically purring as he breathes

out smoke, stretches all languid and slow. “I don't think you'd believe me.”

“Did you think I'd believe King Steve liked dick?” Billy asks, pressing a kiss to Steve's jaw. “Would you have believed that I do?”

“No,” Steve says, draws out the word, and then breaks into a laugh. “Do-- Do you wanna know why you can't go into the pool at night?”

Billy wraps Steve more firmly in his arms. Pulls him tighter, closer. “Tell me, baby.”

“I like it when you call me baby.”

Steve's hand is warm, a little clammy on his face. He takes his cheek against his palm, strokes his thumb under a bruise, careful to skirt tender skin.

He drags on the blunt, pulls smoke into his mouth and then catches Billy's and feeds it past his lips. Smiles when he feels Billy shudder.

But when he pulls back, when he meets Billy’s eyes again, he shifts. He looks small. His voice is hushed, like he's telling Billy some horrible secret.

It kind of is.

“A girl died in my pool. They said she got poisoned, in the chemical leak, but she didn't. She died, right out there.” He gestures to the sliding glass door. “That's why you can't go in it. You might die, too.”

“So she got poisoned but didn't?”

Billy's too high for riddles. For trying to figure shit out that isn't clear.

“Baby,” Billy says, because Steve *likes it*. Because Billy does too. “I know I'm smart, but pretend I'm stupid, huh?”

“There wasn't a chemical leak, Billy.” Steve says. “There was never a chemical leak.”

Okay.

“So, how’d she die? In your pool, how'd she die?”

“A monster took her.”

Billy knows monsters. He knows a hell of a lot of monsters, really. His father is a monster. So was the creep that lived down the block in Cali, the one Neil always told him to keep Max away from. It's no surprise that there are monsters here in Hawkins, too.

“Yeah, but like,” Billy says. “That doesn't mean your pool is like, *unsafe*, right?”

Steve shudders, shakes his head, and gives Billy a weak smile. “This whole town is unsafe, Billy. There are -- there are these *tunnels*, and -- and, okay, it's safe *now*, but it was safe last year, too, until it wasn't.”

And that's -- god, what?

“Like, *underground*? What the fuck, Steve?” And sure, Billy doesn't *usually* call him Steve, but it's easy, it's natural. “What, there's like, people in the tunnels?”

“Not people. Monsters. They're gone, now, but --” Steve says, and then he's shifting, moving as if to push him away, and he's started to shake, like he had been at the field. “We shouldn't be talking about this. I shouldn't be telling you this.”

“Hey,” Billy says, pulling Steve back to him. Like he's trying to keep him warm, shivering as Steve is. “It's okay,” he says softly, unsure.

He feels unsteady, too, because Steve is so goddamn *sincere* and Billy doesn't know what that means anymore, *there's monsters*. Because he thought he'd been sure, but now he's not.

“We don't have to talk about it.”

“I killed one of them,” Steve says, whispers, and presses closer. “The one that got Barb in my pool. I killed ‘em. With Nancy and Jonathan. I think we killed ‘em, anyway. Lit ‘em up.”

Steve laughs again. A shaky, half hysteric thing.

“Lit ‘em up like the goddamn fourth of July.”

Billy swallows. There's a realness to what Steve's saying, something that Billy can almost taste on his tongue. And it -- kinda fucking scares him, if he's being honest.

His heart pounds heavy in his throat.

“Please tell me you're kidding, baby.”

He knows Steve's not. Even though he doesn't know what that *means.*

Steve looks at him. They're both high, and Billy knows he could brush all this off. Knows that, in the morning, he could pretend none of this had happened. That he hasn't heard any of it.

He doesn't want to, though. Horrible as it is, he doesn't want to forget anything Steve's told him tonight. Not about his empty house, not the stupid shit he used to do with Tommy, and not this.

“Chris didn't give you all these bruises,” Steve says, instead of answering him, solemn and soft as touches fingertips to the swelling of Billy's cheek. “Not all monsters look like monsters, do they, Billy?”

When Billy goes still. When he doesn't pull back, but stares down at Steve with wide, horrified eyes, Steve moves.

He leans over and rests their blunt in a fancy crystal ashtray, and then pulls Billy close with both hands. Kisses him long and slow.

“I've killed monsters before,” Steve says. “I'd kill them again.”

Billy shudders. He's not sure what it is exactly, if it's fear or anticipation or anything else.

“Jesus,” he says, because that seems like the only appropriate response to someone offering to *take care* of his father like a monster, like an animal. “It's fine, baby,” Billy says, because it is. “I'm okay. I mean, whose dad doesn't knock them around a bit?”

Steve frowns at him, fingers so fucking gentle as they card through his hair. “It's not okay. But if you ever need somewhere to go, you

can come here."

"Live it up in Casa Harrington?" It's a kind of indulgent fantasy, being able to go to Steve's whenever his own home becomes unbearable. "I guess your parents wouldn't mind, since they're not here, right?"

"They wouldn't even notice," Steve says. "You could stay here all summer."

"*You'd* notice, though," Billy says, because he *wants*. Desperately and acutely. There's nothing he can think that he wants *more*, really.

But that seems like too much to hope for, too much to *ask* for. Steve's just joking, just *saying* that they wouldn't notice.

"I leave a key under the magnolia out front," Steve says. "Use it whenever you want."

Billy considers, pausing for a moment.

"Okay," he finally says, and noses at Steve's neck.

Still feeling good, feeling a little out of his body. He knows he'll show up here, but he promises himself that he won't overstay his welcome. That he won't get all up in Steve's hair.

Steve *beams.* "Okay."

"Monster killer, huh?" Billy says, his mind drifting a little bit with the weed, with his own fatigue, with the warm comfort of Steve in his arms. "Who the fuck knew."

"I told you," Steve says, tucking his cheek against Billy's -- he's ridiculously tactile, high and weighed down under Billy's body like this, constantly touching him with wondering fingers. "I know how to keep a secret. I can keep yours, too."

"It's not a secret, baby," Billy says, even though it kind of *is*.

It just helps to play it off like it's nothing. He knows it's not weird for parents to hit their kids every once in a while -- but he knows what

Neil does it *too much*. He knows it because Neil usually makes sure to keep it where Billy can hide it, though not always.

“You don’t gotta do anything for me,” Billy says. But that’s a lie, too. Because Steve’s hands are perfect and Billy can’t get enough of them wandering around on his skin. “Just -- just don’t stop touching me, huh?”

Steve slides a hand up under the hem of his shirt, palm warm and spread over the lines of his abdomen and pushing up, up, up. “I can do that.”

Billy’s not even looking for more, just this. This closeness. This endless barrage of feeling coming from Steve’s fingertips. He’s greedy for it, addicted.

Billy hums, pressing his face into the crook of Steve’s neck. “I’ll protect you,” Billy says, feeling light, feeling weightless, and still feeling tethered to Steve. “I’ll protect you from the monsters.”

“You don't have to do that, Billy.” Steve says, fingers moving like he's trying to find a pattern on Billy’s skin, pulling at his shirt to get him to take it off, so he can have access to more. “I can take care of myself.”

Billy shifts and the shirt slides from his skin, easy. He lets out a breathy sound when Steve's hands start exploring more, his own limbs loose and lazy. Lax.

“You don't have to, though,” Billy says. “Sometimes you -- seem so alone, and you're not.” He presses a lazy kiss to Steve's neck, his jaw, just to feel the steady pulse beat out underneath his lips. “And I'm right here.”

Steve goes still. Quiet.

When Billy pulls back, Steve's expression is twisted up -- his brows furrowed, his lips thin, his chin breaking -- like he might cry.

It’s like Billy keeps fucking tripping over his own words. His heart skips in the worst kind of way, dropping into his chest. He doesn’t like Steve looking like that -- he doesn’t like it at all.

So, Billy takes Steve's cheeks in his hands, thumbing over his cheeks before kissing the corner of his lips.

"Hey," Billy says, so soft, so careful. Like he's going to say something wrong *again*. "It's okay."

Steve hitches in a breath, shuddering beneath him, hands spreading over his back. Like he's worried Billy will pull away.

"Sorry," he says. "I'm fine."

"Uh huh," Billy says, absolutely not believing that at all. So, he tries again: "What's wrong?"

Billy doesn't know if it's something he did, something he said -- or what. Maybe he was *too much*.

"Nothing, I'm just high, and --" Steve's throat works, eyes big and flitting between Billy's. "And in my experience, people don't *stay*. So it's easier to just… not expect them to."

Billy doesn't know what to say to that. He's never had anyone to stick around for before, so he doesn't know, doesn't understand, really, what it's like to be left. Not like Steve does. Yeah, Billy knows death, but that's different -- that's not a choice.

So he shifts. He sits up and drags Steve with him, until Steve is practically in Billy's lap, sandwiched between his thighs, held tight against his chest. Like Billy can protect him from the world like this, can hold him up and upright.

He doesn't say *sorry* -- that's stupid. He doesn't say *I'll stay*, because they're not -- well -- Billy's got no damn idea what they are right now. He's too high, too weightless and lost to figure it out.

"Then don't expect me to stay," Billy says. Simple. "And then you can be like, pleasantly surprised when you can't get rid of me."

Steve barks out a laugh, pressing his face to Billy's collar. "Yeah, okay. I can do that."

-*-

When morning comes, it is not with its usual unbearable heat. A chill settled between the trees of Hawkins, into the bark and soil, and the heavy press of clouds threatened a long rain.

“It'll burn off by noon,” Steve tells him, when he wakes to empty arms and an empty bed, and hunts Steve down outside, outback, by the pool-- looking up at the sky and smoking one of Billy's cigarettes.

He looks well rested, at least. Billy doesn't see the usual dark circles under his eyes.

“So, enjoy it while we can?” Billy asks.

He sits down on one of the chairs next to Steve’s, fishes another cigarette out of the pack, and lights up. He feels hazy and a little thin, like he’s overslept. Like maybe he’s still dreaming.

Billy didn’t get to wake up next to Steve, didn’t get to press his face against sleep-warm skin, didn’t get to doze against Steve’s heat.

It’s weird, missing someone who’s right there.

“You sleep alright?” Billy asks, smoke filling his lungs.

“Better than usual,” Steve says, and it seems the brutal honesty of the night before is lingering. “You?”

Billy shrugs. He lets himself fall back in the chair. “Yeah,” he breathes out, feeling pretty good, if not a little out of it. “Yeah, I did.”

It helps, sleeping next to someone. Being able to roll over and touch warmth.

Steve pulls on his cigarette, breathes out slow, and looks at him. “You got plans today?”

Another shrug. Billy tries to pull up a mental calendar of what his dad’s schedule looks like, of what Max’s schedule looks like, but he’s not quite awake enough.

“I need coffee,” he says, with another drag on his cigarette. He also needs to not feel so far away from Steve. But out here, in the real

world, under the clouds and in the stillness, it feels like Steve is just out of reach. Like Billy can't close the gap between them -- or maybe, he just doesn't know *how*. "And maybe breakfast, too." He's hungry. His stomach feels absolutely empty. "We could go to the diner," Billy says, feeling suddenly very much like he's asking Steve to go on a date. "Unless you've got food here."

Steve looks at him, finally. Pulls his eyes from the sky and smiles his way.

"You asking me to cook for you, Hargrove?"

"I mean, I was offering to *pay*," Billy says, with a twist of his lips.

"Oh," Steve blinks, and then he's reaching out to push some of the mess of Billy's curls away from his face, fingers twitching and then dropping-- like maybe he thinks that's something he's not allowed. "That'd be nice. I could dig some waffles."

Billy wants to lean into the touch, into Steve's careful, cautious fingers. He kind of does, chasing the heat, before he pushes himself forward to stand.

"Come on, then. The waitress has the hots for me, so I get free pie." He flashes Steve a grin, gesturing for Steve to go so Billy can follow. "Maybe, if you ask nice, I'll even let you have the first bite."

Steve looks at him, eyes bright, trailing backwards to the door and flicking the butt of his cigarette away. "Pretty please?"

"Maybe," Billy says, stretching out the word on his tongue. "But if it's cherry pie, you're shit out of luck, baby."

When they get to the diner and eat their fill, Billy does get his pie. Cherry, of course.

And Steve gets the first bite.

-*-

Thunderstorms in Indiana are nothing like they are in California.

Billy drives out to the far edge of town, past the buildings, past the trees, past the humanity of it all. He throws his car into park on the side of the road, kicking up dust and dirt, sprawling fields in every direction around him, as far as the eye can see.

The air is charged and heavy, full with potential. It kicks up the hairs on his arm, gets his adrenaline rushing as the winds start to blow. He feels pent up, cooped up, like he's going to crawl out of his own skin.

Right in front of him is a wall of clouds, rolling toward him, slow but inevitable. Like everything else in this goddamn place.

He watches it for a while, smoking one cigarette, then two. He crushes the third out, half-smoked, beneath his foot when the corn stalks around him begin to sway with the force of the winds. They're not too tall yet -- *knee-high by the fourth of July,* his mom used to always say -- but the plants make a racket anyway. Enough of a warning that he shouldn't be out here. Something tall in this flat land full of nothing but space. Not when a storm like this is coming.

Out by the water, by the ocean, storms feel different. They're like an awakening, an absolution. Here, out in this land of misery and monotony, they do nothing but rile Billy up, egg him on like harsh words before a fight.

And don't you fuckin' come home tonight, you hear me?

The worst part, Billy thinks, is when he *can't* throw a punch. When he can't find someone to help get his anger out. There's no whip of seabreeze against his skin, no taste of salt in his mouth.

Just iron and blood, when he can manage to score a fight.

The sky lights up, bright and full of lightning. Then, the thunder comes.

Billy stands next to his car, waiting for a beat too long, until he feels the first few fat raindrops fall onto his skin.

Then, he slams into his car and speeds back to Hawkins, hoping to outrun the storm.

-*-

By the time he gets to Steve's, it's pouring.

He doesn't wait to knock, just finds the hidden key and lets himself in, dripping all over the marble foyer floor.

Still keyed up, still buzzing with the storm's energy mixed with his own, he kicks off his shoes, lets them land in a muddy, wet pile next to the door.

"Honey, I'm home!" Billy says, voice loud enough to carry, just after another crack of thunder.

It's been two weeks since he spent the night here. Two weeks since Steve told him he could, even when he was bruised and battered, that he could find shelter in the empty walls of Steve's home.

It had been a good two weeks, mostly. Filled with bright days, edging around Steve Harrington and whatever it was that might be building between them. The soft looks when no one could see, the way Steve would sway closer like he wanted to touch but knew better, the quiet seconds they could steal with their mouths, their hands, on each other. Building to a storm, like the one raging outside.

Steve's house is lit up, like it always is. Every light is on, and Billy knows it's because Steve is afraid of the dark -- or maybe what can hide in it.

When Steve rounds the corner from the living room, however, in a ratty gym shirt and sleep pants like he had no intention of seeing anyone today -- his hair is proof of that, a mess on his head -- he's got a lighter and a candle clutched in his hands.

"Billy," he says, blinking at him like he's surprised to find him there, dripping in his foyer, but his brows draw together and he steps closer. "You okay?"

Billy doesn't have an answer for that.

"You got anything to drink around here?" he asks, instead, pulling the soaking fabric of his shirt away from his chest. "Something pricey

for a special occasion?"

It's hot outside. Cold in here, with the expensive A/C blowing cool and fresh. Even wet, Billy is still warm, though. Still running hot. Feverish.

Steve watches him with those big, knowing eyes of his. It makes Billy's skin itch.

"Yeah," Steve says, a little slow, and then gestures back into the house with a swing of his head. "What are we celebrating?"

"Hell if I know," Billy says, with a stiff roll of his shoulders. "How about my face?"

He gestures to it, to the healing bruises, to the skin knitting itself back together. He'd thought for certain Neil was going to wail on him again tonight, was going to open up old cuts and aggravate healing bruises. But he hadn't. Billy had pushed him, snarled at him -- and Neil had simply told him to *get out.*

It had been deeply unsettling.

It always is. Neil likes to do it, likes to make Billy wait for it, get him to a place where he'll grow complacent and sure. Here he'll falter, eventually, and Neil will be able to put him in his place again.

Psychological warfare, Max had called it once. Billy had told her to shut up. Told her she didn't know what she was talking about.

She's not wrong.

Steve looks at him and nods. "It's a pretty good face. I can dig celebrating it."

He gestures for Billy to follow. Pads, barefoot, into the kitchen and digs around in one of the cabinets, lighter and candle discarded.

Pulls out a bottle of bourbon from the back and sets it down.

He looks tired, Billy realizes. Wonders if he's been getting any sleep. Or if the storm has him on edge.

Steve pours them both big glasses and holds one out to Billy. “To your face.”

Lightning, from the kitchen window, suddenly illuminates the already well-lit room. It lights up the glasses and the amber liquid within. The drink will probably be wasted on him, but there’s something satisfying about knowing he’s downing something expensive, wasting it completely.

“To my face,” Billy says, clinking his glass with Steve’s. “To yours.”

Steve snorts, but he takes a big swallow when he tips his head back. Shudders as it goes down, and makes a face.

He looks so damn soft. Too soft. Billy wants to bite into him. Wants to see his eyes light up and burn.

“How'd you get caught in the storm?” he asks.

Billy kinda wants to break him, a little bit, too.

“I was out,” he says. “Felt it in the air. Wanted to see it roll in.”

Steve takes another drink, slower, and watches him with that keen gaze. “Felt it in the air. Like electricity, right?”

Billy hums. The liquor, when he takes a sip of it, lingers on his tongue and burns his throat. He takes another, then another -- just because he can.

“Just like that.”

Steve sets his glass aside, crosses his arms over his chest, and there's electricity here, too. Something sparking, something building, right under the surface.

Steve seems too feel it, too. Because he looks at Billy and asks: “What are you doing here?”

His tone isn’t hostile. But it doesn’t leave much space for argument, either. There’s no room for Billy to shrug his shoulders, not an inch of give for him to pull away. Not that he particularly wants to. If

anything, he wants to surge forward and force himself into Steve's solidity.

"He told me not to come back tonight," Billy says. "So, here I am."

Some of the caution, some of the dullness, in Steve's eyes fades. Something sharpens.

He stares art Billy and then takes a step forward. Steps closer, into Billy's space, like an invitation. Like a challenge.

"Here you are," Steve says, wetting his lips, eyes flitting over the way Billy's jaw ticks tight, the way his shoulders draw back, the way his fingers curl tighter around his glass. "I'm surprised you're not out looking for a fight, instead."

His words are careful. Picked deliberately. Billy knows it. Billy knows that Steve knows he hears it.

"But you're here. Because you want something." Steve says, voice lowering. "So, what do you want, Billy? To hurt? Or be hurt?"

Billy's mouth goes a little dry. The room around him spins. He takes another drink.

"Both," he says, after a long moment. "Either."

Unable to choose, reeling with the options.

He'd been prepared for whatever his father gave him. Now, without anything, he's spinning. He'd been itching for a fight, but instead, he'd come here -- just like Steve had asked him to.

Steve nods again. "Put the drink down."

Billy does, after taking another sip.

The glass clinks loud against the counter, just as another roll of thunder shakes the house. Billy watches Steve's fingers flex at his sides when his arms unwind. Thinks he might be just as strung out, for completely different reasons.

Steve pushes forward, as the rain comes down heavy and hard on the house, the only sound outside of their breathing. His hands are on Billy's hips, shoving him back, knocking him into the edge of the counter hard enough to hurt -- but not enough to bruise.

Billy thinks he might kiss him. Might lean in and catch his mouth, that same frantic way he had in the back of Billy's car.

He doesn't.

Instead, he waits. Hands on Billy's hips, fingers flexing, breath on his mouth. He waits.

Billy studies his face. His skin is sun-kissed and mole-dotted, and his eyes are bright and aware, focused completely on Billy. For a beat, Billy doesn't know what to do. Then, he realizes -- Steve's waiting for *him*.

Patiently, at that.

Smart as he is on paper, Billy's not all that good at knowing himself, sometimes. Not like Steve is.

But Billy doesn't need more of an invitation than that. He surges forward, lips to Steve's. Kissing him none too gently. Zero-to-sixty, like he's trying to outrun the storm.

Steve groans. Lets the force of it knock him back a bit. Lets Billy bite and lick his way into his mouth.

But then he's *pushing*. Muscling him back against the counter edge again. Shoving him and pinning him; giving Billy something to rally against.

A force to submit to. Or to overcome.

It's the nicest damn thing anyone's ever done for Billy. Not that he's really thinking all that much at all.

His mouth waters for a fight, his skin itches for it. He pushes back against Steve, hard, shoving and driving forward until Steve stumbles back and Billy's got him up against the opposite wall.

A picture frame tumbles to the floor, glass shattering. Billy kisses Steve all the same.

Steve hisses, like a damn cat, arching against him. Fingers curl into Billy's hair and *yank*, pain sharp enough to pull Billy's head back, to give Steve enough room to dip in and bite at Billy's jaw. Unforgiving as he fists his hand into Billy's shirt and tugs him closer.

Billy groans, pushing his body hard against Steve's, taking any space between them for himself. He likes the pain, *needs* it. Billy digs his fingers into Steve's shoulders and shoves him against the wall again, hard, pushing Steve back up so he can claim his mouth and keep him there.

Billy's teeth find Steve's lip and he pulls, until Steve makes a noise. Until Billy tastes a bit of blood on his tongue and licks it up.

Steve's hand finds his face. He's not mindful of the healing bruises, like he has been before, and he pushes at it, at Billy, grunts as he shoves some space back between them and breathes heavy.

His mouth is red, tender, and already swelling where Billy’s teeth dug in. He shifts his weight, kicks at Billy's ankle, and reels him around to knock Billy back against the wall when his balance wavers.

“Plant your fucking feet, Hargrove.” He says and then kisses him hard.

Billy burns hot. His blood feels like fire as it pulses through his veins. He spins, air knocked out of him in the best way, panting and licking into Steve's mouth, reeling.

It's better than any fight he could've found. When he arches against Steve, he meets a solid, unforgiving mass. He pushes until it hurts, until he can feel the force with which Steve holds him back, the muscles. Steve's not weak, not a pushover -- and Billy can't get enough of it.

Since Steve isn't playing fair, Billy doesn't either. He digs his fingernails, blunt as they are, into the skin of Steve's lower back. He works a hand up between them and gets a grip on Steve's throat.

He expects Steve to hiss and spit, to smack him away and bare his teeth at him. He expects him to use that thigh he's got between Billy's to do more than press against where his cock has filled out in his jeans.

He doesn't.

Instead, he goes still. Goes quiet. For a second, Billy thinks he's pressed this too far.

But then Steve goes *soft*. Warm and pliant, hard lines melting against him, and he presses into Billy's palm enough for Billy to feel his throat work under it.

Billy could surge forward if he wanted to. He could take back the space Steve's body is suddenly forfeiting. But he finds that he can't. That he’s trapped, mesmerized by Steve's face. By the way he’s gone lax.

Billy shifts his fingers a little, gets a better grip. He kisses Steve and pulls back until his head hits the wall, just to get a better look.

His lips are parted on shuddering, shivering breaths. Billy can feel him swallow, can feel his pulse flutter at his fingertips. There's a flush on his face that wasn't there before, not even when they were shoving each other around, and his eyes are focused, pupils wide, on Billy’s face.

He reaches up. Catches Billy’s wrist in a loose grip. Doesn't even try to pull him off. Just holds on, waiting again, for Billy.

Go ahead, his body says, promises, bends when Billy pulls him closer. *I trust you*.

Billy can't say no to that. Nor does he want to.

Carefully, fire in him still burning hot and bright -- but *steady,* so steady now --Billy tightens his grip on Steve's neck. He presses his fingers in, feels Steve’s breathing go a little shallow.

Heat spikes through Billy like lighting, sparking him up from the inside.

“Jesus,” Billy murmurs. “Look at you.”

Steve shudders, trembles heavy against him, and sucks in a sharp, short breath. His hips buck, weight settling into Billy, and his free hand clutches at the wet cotton of Billy's shirt, giving a little pull.

All the air in Billy's chest escapes at once, in one shaky breath, as Steve grinds against him. Billy rocks forward, still finding the resistance of Steve's body, the stability of it.

Billy tightens his grip, just a little, and then lets it up again. Testing.

“*Billy*,” Steve gasps, and his voice is an absolute wreck.

He plasters himself closer. Steadies himself with a hand on the wall behind Billy. Presses their hips flush and tips his head back, like he's offering his throat up for Billy’s hand.

Jesus fucking Christ, Billy thinks, as he tightens his grip to press in on Steve's airway again. He rocks forward as he does it, feels their cocks grind against each other, feels Steve’s need against his own.

He feels the sound, the *whimper*, that wells up from Steve's chest and catches in his throat. Feels the way Steve ruts in reply.

He's gorgeous, cheeks flush and eyes losing that sharp focus. His jaw falls open, breath coming in shallow and short, and he rocks with Billy there against his kitchen wall. His hips stutter when Billy’s thumb digs in under the soft spot beneath his ear.

Billy makes sure he gives Steve a chance to breathe. Makes sure he can hear it, can feel the air passing under his fingers, the palm of his hand. He makes sure he can hear Steve take in an impressive breath -- and then he squeezes again. Steve groans. Billy sucks in a huff of air, eyes caught on Steve -- hypnotized.

“Fuck,” Billy says. “*Fuck*.”

This is by far the hottest thing Billy has ever done. All of the anger underneath his skin has been long forgotten in favor of vicious want, burning need. He’s greedy for it, for the feeling of Steve under his fingers, pressing in against his cock, the two of them rocking against

each other like it’s the best goddamn thing.

Steve's fingers grow tight over his wrist. Lock there and clutch at his shoulder as he rides forward. Billy can feel his throat work, again, then again. Can feel him strain a little, bucking, tugging and gasping in a few breaths when Billy lets him.

And that's a rush. *When Billy lets him*. That Steve trusts him so much he's letting him take this kind of control, this kind of power over him.

“Billy,” Steve whispers, against his mouth, and then Billy tightens his grip again and Steve *shatters* for him.

Billy can feel all of Steve’s muscles go, can feel the way his hips stutter and shake against Billy’s. He *comes apart* and it’s all at Billy’s hand.

Billy lets go, lets Steve breathe, lets him gasp as he shakes against Billy. He’s the prettiest damn thing Billy’s ever seen, face lax with pleasure, breath hot against Billy’s lips as he goes to kiss Steve, as he licks the air straight out of Steve’s mouth.

Steve moans, arching against him, but it's a weak, feeble thing. He's fully leaned against him, propping himself up against Billy's chest, and panting into his mouth. Sloppy and loose and wet.

It’s enough to get Billy burning hot again, fingers still around Steve’s neck, even though they aren’t all that tight anymore. Billy knows how that kind of pain works -- doesn’t want to push Steve too far now that he’s come. But he does hold on as he rolls his body against Steve -- and the friction isn’t quite enough.

So, Billy moves. He flips Steve -- *should’ve planted your feet* -- and presses him against the wall, grinding himself against Steve’s hip. And *there*, that’s it -- that’s the sheer friction he needed, just on this side of painful and rough.

Steve *keens*; a breathless, helpless sound. He squirms, writhes against him, eyes wide and mouth open, and he *claws* over Billy's shoulders with blunt nails and rides out the oversensitivity, the overwhelming heat, as Billy's hips drive against his own.

Punctuates each thrust with a gasp of Billy's name. *Billy, Billy, Billy*. So sweet, so soft, that it sounds like he's begging.

Billy's fingers are still loose around Steve's neck. He can't help the occasional squeeze, just to turn his name into something panted, something choked. It's like music, and it's so *fucking good*.

Those nails dig into Billy's skin, wet fabric a useless shield from Steve's clawing fingers. It hurts, but in the best kind of way, the way that has Billy picking up the pace and panting out a wet, hot *"Steve."*

He's close, so close, but he just needs a *little* something more.

Steve moans and then catches on it. Arches as Billy's fingers curl tight again. Chokes off pants and reels Billy closer, a hand shaking as it cups his nape. He spreads his legs, hitches a heel behind one of Billy's knees, and chokes on a cry.

He's gasping against his mouth. Not even kissing him. But the way he bows against him, the way he lets Billy use him, is all the encouragement he needs to know that Steve wants it.

Billy *takes*. He grinds hard against Steve, lets his fingers pull tight over Steve's throat, and licks messily into his mouth. He takes and takes, until he's gasping against Steve's lips, choking out a moan like he's embarrassed by the sound of it, loud in the midst of the storm.

His body thrums with the pleasure as he lets himself fall against Steve, fingers going slack, body going loose. Billy can barely breathe, but still he's kissing Steve's panting mouth, smoothing fingers over his throat.

After a moment, Steve slumps back against the wall. Any fight, any heat, is gone for something close to exhaustion.

Still, Steve takes Billy's face between his hands and tips his face forward, touching their foreheads together and resting there. His throat works against Billy's gentle fingers, and Steve shudders for him.

"Better?" he asks, softer than a whisper.

Billy wants to lie. It feels safer than the storm outside, the storm in here, between the two of them -- even quiet as it is, now. But he's too exhausted to, can't even find the words.

“Yeah,” he hears himself say.

He should ask Steve if he's ok. If Billy's hurt him. If Billy's hurt him *again*. Instead, he dips his head so that he can kiss Steve's throat. So he can lean against his shoulder.

Steve shudders. His fingers are gentle, so gentle, soothing over Billy's scalp.

“Good,” he says.

Billy doesn't remember making it to the couch. But somehow they're *there*, and Billy’s crowding Steve down against the soft fabric of it, pushing into his space like if he gets close enough he could crawl inside Steve's skin.

The rain beats steady against the window, the thunder merely rolling in the background now. Just a summer storm, hard and fast and violent, faded into something easy, something kind.

“You're something else,” Billy says, lips at Steve's neck again, breath hot against sweaty skin.

Steve huffs out a little sound. “I'm a mess, is what I am.”

“Well, we both are, then.”

“We're gonna need a shower,” Steve says, still pulling his fingers through Billy's hair, not moving another inch more -- letting the weight of Billy's body anchor him down.

It feels like everything left Billy all at once.

He doesn't think he can stomach the thought of moving away from Steve right now, doesn't think he could wrench his arms from around Steve’s warmth. Even with come cooling in his pants, he can't imagine it.

“In a bit,” he says. He doesn't necessarily kiss Steve's neck, just lays his lips there like a seal. “You okay?” he asks, finally able to bear the words. “I didn't hurt you?”

“A little,” Steve admits. “But I wanted you to hurt me a little. I'm okay. Are you?”

Billy makes a noise in his throat, mostly involuntary. It's weird, and he feels *weird*, but it's not necessarily *bad*.

He had wanted to hurt Steve, too. But not in the way he had before, not even close.

“Yeah,” Billy says. “I'm okay.” Because he is. Even though it's weird.

Steve hums, stretches a little beneath him, and wrinkles up his nose-- probably because of the come in his pants. “I'm glad. I'm-- I'm happy I could help.”

Billy wants to ask how Steve knew so perfectly what to do, how he seemingly knows Billy so well when even Billy feels lost with himself. But he doesn't -- he just pulls back and presses his nose to Steve's cheek.

“Do you want to shower now?” He feels better. A little more grounded.

Knowing Steve's ok, that he wanted what Billy gave him, helps tremendously.

“Not yet,” Steve says, turning his face to tuck his cheek to Billy’s. “Hold me for a while longer?”

Billy hums and then shifts, settling in so that he can pull Steve even closer to him, crowding him against the couch and sheltering both of them from the world.

-*-

The day the pool opens back up, at the beginning of August and weeks after finding himself at Steve's more often than not, pretending to teach Steve anything long forgotten for hidden time spent together

in an empty house, is the same day his father backhands him in the morning for wasting the last of the milk. It had expired two days before, and Billy's made himself sick not *wasting* things before -- but he refuses to let Max do it.

He's itching a little. Prickling and hyper aware. But when he sees Steve lounging by the pool, sunglasses on, nowhere near Kelly and the lifeguard stand, something in him settles. Settles the way it always settles around Steve.

For Steve.

The kids are already in the water, Max shoving her bag at Billy before diving in after them. Billy doesn't mind because it gives him an excuse.

"You look hot," Billy says as he comes up, blocking Steve's sun, and he does.

Billy wants to peel him right out of those stupid, red swim shorts.

Steve grins. "Well, it's a hot day. Record breaking, from what I hear."

Billy hums and just looks down at Steve. Admiring.

"You're gonna get pink real fast," Billy says.

Luckily, Billy hasn't burned once all summer. He's just golden, perfectly tanned all over.

Steve props himself up onto his elbows, peering over the top his sunglasses at him. "You offering to get my back again, Hargrove?"

"Apparently," Billy says, because he'll always take an excuse to get his hands all over Steve's body.

There's something about being able touch Steve out in the open, around people, that ignites something in him. It's primal, the need for people to see that he's got his hands all over Steve. To show that Steve is *his*.

Billy doesn't even ask for permission, just fishes out the lotion from

the bag tucked under Steve's chair. Steve barks out a laugh when he sees it.

"Is that my cue to turn over for you?"

"You're damn fucking right it is," Billy says, squirting some lotion onto the palm of his hand.

He wishes he could straddle Steve, could swing a leg over him and just have at, right here in the middle of town. But Billy'll settle for edging in next to him, twisted a little to get the best angle, hip at Steve's hip.

Steve eyes him for a second and then flips over, wiggling onto his belly, his back bare to him. He looks over his shoulder at him, brow up, and tucks his chin onto the fold of his arms.

"Should I brace myself?" he asks. "You look like you mean business."

"What, you think I won't be gentle?" Billy asks.

He heavily debates upending the bottle of sunscreen over Steve's lower back, just to see him squirm at the suddenness of it. But he doesn't. He lets his hands warm the lotion before he settles his hands over Steve's shoulder blades and *pushes*. Skin, sliding smooth against hot skin.

Steve shudders under his hands. The way he always shudders under Billy's touch. Like his body longs for it, like Steve craves Billy's hands on his skin when they're apart.

His shoulders roll, and then he hums, relaxing under him in a way he hadn't the first time Billy had touched him like this.

"You've got a bruise," Steve says, almost absent, but he feels Steve's eyes on him.

Billy can't resist digging his thumbs into muscle until he hears the breath escape Steve's lungs, until he feels Steve deflate a little bit more. He doesn't think much of it, just spreads the lotion over Steve's back and starts working it in, fingers working over Steve's muscles as he goes.

“Yeah,” he says, because there's not much else to say about it. No explanation that makes sense, either. “You like it?”

“Rugged and charming as it makes you look, I think I prefer it when you aren't hurt.” Steve says, voice soft, and his spine curves as Billy strokes down. “I'd offer to kiss it better, but I don't think I can do that here.”

Billy digs his thumbs in a little when his fingers run over a knot next to Steve's spine. He's not even pretending anymore to be doing this for the sunscreen -- though he does pour a little extra on Steve's back for good measure.

“No, not here,” Billy agrees. “If he heard --” Billy starts, and then things better of it. Steve doesn't need Billy's baggage: he's got enough of his own and he already has too much of Billy's. “Well, you know.”

Steve groans. Tries to muffle the sound against his arms, and the muscles jump under Billy's fingers as he kneads into him.

“Later, then.” Steve says, a little on this side of breathless. “I'll kiss it better later.”

It sounds like a promise. Something sweet, like the watermelon that melted on his tongue so many long days ago.

“Yeah?” Billy asks, kneading the heel of his hand down. “That's awful kind of you, King Steve.”

Steve twitches as something goes loose. He lets out a long, shaking breath, and goes boneless under his hands.

It's sort of spectacular, watching Steve go easy like this for him. Especially here, where anyone could see Billy working Steve into a loose, relaxed mess. It's kind of heady, spinning, that Steve is letting him do this. That he probably wouldn't let anyone else do this.

“S’the least I can do,” Steve mutters. “Wish I could do more.”

“*Why*?” Billy asks. He hasn't done anything all all for Steve. Just eat his food and steal his space.

Steve turns his face to look at him, pulls his sunglasses off, and purses his lips up as he props onto his elbows. “You really don't know?”

Billy’s hands still, pausing on Steve’s warm skin. There’s not much lotion left, but Billy hasn’t let that stop him from touching, from that indulgence.

“Pretty sure I’ve just been raising your water bill, pretty boy.”

Which is entirely true. Billy takes *long* showers. Especially when the water’s so hot.

“And the kids use me for free rides and pizza money,” Steve says, but his face softens. “But I put up with it because I care about them. So, why do you think I put up with you?”

Idly, Billy digs his thumb in a bit more, poking at a sore muscle. Something about that statement makes him ache in an empty, hungry sort of way. He doesn’t know *why* it hurts, just that it does -- and he wants Steve to hurt, just a little bit, too.

“Don’t get attached,” Billy says.

He’s not sure if he’s talking to Steve, or.

Steve huffs out a laugh, flopping forward with a hiss, but his eyes are bright on Billy’s face. “Too late.”

Billy doesn’t have words for that. He doesn’t even have a *feeling* for that -- his chest feels tight and hollow. He lets his fingers smooth out over Steve’s back, making sure he’s rubbed all the lotion in, and then he pulls back.

Flopping down on the lounger next to Steve makes the distance between them feel so far, so vast.

“We should take the kids to get shakes after this.”

Because Billy wants something cold, because he wants something to do with his tongue. Because he wants to buy Steve a strawberry shake with a stupidly sweet fake cherry on the top. Because he doesn’t know what else to *say*.

“You're gonna spoil them,” Steve says, eyes on his face.

Billy hasn’t let himself spend much time thinking past this summer, past the endlessly long days and the sticky warm sunshine. But the days are getting shorter now, and he can’t ignore it. Even as much as he wants to.

He tilts his head up and stares at the blue sky, at the flat nothingness that mirrors the ground below it.

“They won’t get used to it,” he says.

“No,” Steve says, like he knows, and maybe he does. “I don't imagine they will.”

It doesn’t make Billy feel *better* exactly, but it doesn’t make him feel worse, either. He knows this isn’t some whirlwind, storybook romance. They aren’t going to run off together into the sunset, happily ever after.

But Billy *can* have this summer. He already knows he’ll look back on it and feel warm. He’ll be able to smell the coconut sunscreen and remember the taste of cherry on Steve’s lips.

“Come here and get my back,” Billy says. “If you feel like you owe me.”

“Do I owe you?” Steve asks, but he's already grinning, already moving -- sliding over to press his hip to Billy’s side.

“Not at all,” Billy says, sighing when sunscreen-slick hands smooth out over his skin.

“Too bad,” Steve says, working the lotion in, pressing in between his shoulder blades and working down along his ribs with the flats of his palms. “You probably coulda milked that. Me, owing you.”

Months ago, Billy would’ve been salivating at the idea of Steve owing him. Now, the thought makes him feel a little flat. A little listless. He doesn’t want that, doesn’t want Steve to think he owes Billy anything.

Steve works the breath out of Billy with his fingers, his palms. He

goes a little quiet, a little loose under those hands.

“How about you can owe me for the shake I’m gonna buy you,” Billy says.

One of Steve's hands crawls up, curls over his nape and squeezes. “And what would you like in exchange?”

Billy goes boneless.

A little while after Steve’s hands move away from his neck and keep working the lotion into his skin, Billy turns a little bit, resting his head on a pillowed arm.

“Let me come over tonight,” Billy says. He doesn’t have to ask -- he’s shown up unannounced with Steve’s open invitation -- but it’s not the same.

Steve looks down at him, smile small, and he reaches up, smoothing a thumb over the high line of Billy's cheek-- where he might press a kiss if he could -- and nods. “Done.”

Billy heats under Steve’s touch, cheeks going a little flush, even with the warmth of the day.

“We should go in the water,” Billy says, apropos of absolutely nothing, other than the sun and the red on his skin.

Steve goes still, glancing over his shoulder at the water, at the people splashing around. “I don't, uh…”

“I know,” Billy says, shifting a little so he can actually look at Steve. Curled in an S-shape around Steve on the lounger. “But it’s not your pool. It’s safe. And if you think I’m not going to punch anyone who comes near you, you’re dead wrong.”

Steve laughs a little, head dipping, hair falling into his face. “Just, uh… promise not to punch one of the kids?”

“I think I made that promise a long time ago,” Billy says.

He curls a little, pushing his knee until it bumps against Steve’s hip.

A little point of comfort.

Steve deflates a bit. His smile is tight, but he's already nodding.

“Yeah, okay. I could use a break from the heat.”

Billy sits up, slides his feet around the other side of the lounger. He stands, moving over to Steve, and offers him a hand. He knows he can’t guide Steve by the hand the entire way to the pool, but he’ll take this little bit.

“Alright, pretty boy. Let’s get you wet.”

Steve snorts, eyeing him for a second, but Billy thinks the reluctance is less about him and more about the prospect of climbing into the pool. “You'd like that, wouldn't you?”

But he takes Billy’s hand, lets him pull him to his feet, and clings for another second before letting go. He gestures to the water with his chin, *lead the way* on his face.

“Obviously,” Billy says, but he’d rather get Steve in the pool and away from a fear, if he can. He doesn’t know why it’s important to him, but it *is*, suddenly.

Billy walks toward the shallow end of the pool, Steve trailing diagonally behind him. Just in Billy’s line of sight, but barely. Blurry and like a shadow.

“Steps, or you wanna slide in by the wall?” Billy asks.

“Steps,” Steve says.

The water is refreshingly cold when Billy takes the first couple steps and turns around. He hasn’t spent nearly as much time in the pool as maybe he should have. But Steve’s always out on the deck, and Billy is far too greedy.

“Alright, King Steve,” Billy says. “The water’s perfect.”

Billy’s got eyes only for Steve, but a posture that says explicitly *don’t come near me*. That, combined with his reputation, gives them a

pretty damn large amount of free space around them.

Steve stands at the edge for a fraction of a second too long. Enough for Billy to see him doubt himself, for his face to color in the sunshine, and for him to shake his head, reach out, and brace a hand on the railing.

“You're an idiot, Steve Harrington.” Steve says, to himself, under his breath, and Billy wonders what asshole has said that to him often enough that it's seemed to stick.

But he's knee deep and looking ready to bolt before Billy can give it too much thought. His breath is coming a little quick, hands flexing at his sides. Maybe half a second from panicking and calling it quits.

It doesn’t take any thought to step closer to Steve and back up the steps, to loop an arm around his neck like they’re pals, like Billy’s leaning in and telling him a secret. He doesn’t pull Steve any further into the pool, just stands there next to him, firm and steady and solid, in all the ways Steve usually is.

“You got this,” he says, voice pitched low enough that only Steve’ll be able to hear him.

Steve nods, throat working, and when he steps forward, Billy moves with him. Steps down, deeper, with Steve's pace, until they're in the shallows.

The water feels so good, cooling off the brutal heat of the day. With Steve underneath his arm, it makes the sun bearable.

Billy doesn’t say much, just keeps his eyes trained on Steve’s face, ignoring the closeness between them, ignoring how anyone could see, could *wonder*. Steve is his only focus.

The tightness around his mouth, at his brow. The way his jaw clenches and relaxes. He carries his fear on his face, in his body, and Billy is struck by awe two-fold.

That Steve could trust him like this, let him guide him into his fear like this. And that Steve could carry so much terror in him, but would be willing to face it just because Billy asked.

“You’re okay,” Billy says. “I’ve got you,” he also says. “I’ll protect you.”

Because Billy doesnt’t know what monsters Steve is so brutally terrified of, but he’ll charge them face on if he has to. With just his fists and Steve’s trust to back him up.

“I know,” Steve says, and his shoulders go a little loose under his arm. “We can go deeper.”

This time, Billy’s the one who inches them forward, sticking close to the side of the pool, by the wall. The water laps comfortingly around him, cooling the sun from his skin, and he can’t even begin to imagine the way it feels to Steve, the oppressive way the pool makes him feel closed in, boxed up.

“It’s a pity Tommy’s not here,” Billy says, voice still low like it’s all a secret, like he’s cuddled up to Steve like this for a reason. “I was kinda hoping to get to punch him in the nose.”

But no -- Billy’s glad he’s not, glad that most people seem to prefer the quarry to the pool. It makes this easier.

“He can't sneak booze as easily here,” Steve says, laughing a little, reaching up and gripping the edge of the wall as they creep along. “And you'd get kicked out if you broke his nose.”

Billy would rather have Steve’s fingers ghosting over his hips or his ribs than the concrete of the pool deck. But he knows that’s a stupid wish, that he can have Steve’s hands on him later, probably. Steve hasn’t denied him, yet.

“Guess so,” Billy says. “But it’d be worth it.”

Billy’s still riled about Tommy tossing Steve in -- but he can’t help but feel a little thankful, too. It feels like maybe it was the start of something, pulling Steve out of the water that day.

“I think you just like punching people,” Steve says, but it's with a smile he directs Billy’s way, and he's breathing easier, even though the water is up to their chests.

“Yeah, maybe,” Billy says, unable to fight that one. “I gotta have at least *one* flaw, right?”

“Oh, only one?” Steve asks, smile going wider.

“Pretty sure,” Billy says, unable to stop himself from grinning.

The water hits higher and Billy dips his arm under the water, around Steve’s waist, instead of around his shoulders.

It seems to be exactly what Steve needs. He slumps a bit, lets his weight settle a bit against him, and drops his hand from the ledge.

“Yeah, alright.” Steve says. “Only the one.”

Billy’s grin gets wider. His chest, despite the cool water, feels hotter. His heart kicks up, like it always does with Steve.

“We don’t have to go any deeper, unless you want to,” Billy says.

Any further, and Billy’ll have to kick up and start treading water. It helps that Steve’s got an inch or so on him.

“No,” Steve says, twisting a bit to look at him, back to the wall of the pool, eyes flitting over his shoulder at the kids playing, at the people swimming. “No, this is good.”

Under the water, where no one can see, Steve's hand finds one of Billy's. He laces their fingers together and squeezes.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah,” Billy breathes out, fingers tightening around Steve’s in lieu of the kiss he truly wants. “Of course. Anything for you, pretty boy.”

And he kind of means it, too.

Steve's gaze darts over his face. His expression goes soft again, as he looks at Billy, and his thumb traces an idle pattern over the back of his hand.

He wants to lean in. Wants to press his mouth to Steve's, people

seeing be damned, and he sways forward a bit, like he means to, like he's going to kiss him for being so damn beautiful, so damn brave --

When Dustin pops up, snorkle and all, right next to them.

“Steve! You're in the water!”

Steve jumps, presses more fully against the wall, fingers going painfully tight over Billy's. “Yeah. It's pretty hot out today.”

“That's awesome.” Dustin beams, at the two of them, and gestures back at where everyone else is playing around. “We're playing Marco-Polo. Wanna join?”

Steve looks to Billy. “Interested?”

Billy isn’t -- not really. But if Steve is, he’s in. Unfortunately. He’s just got that kind of *face* Billy can’t say no to, apparently.

“Are you *sure* I can’t punch him in the face? Just a little bit?” Billy asks.

Dustin points a finger at him. “You're so not on my team.”

Steve laughs.

-*-

There’s no hope of shepherding Steve away to a different booth for some peace and quiet at the diner after the pool. Steve somehow manages to convince Billy into the booth opposite him, the two graduates pressed up against the wall with all the kids bracketing them in.

Billy thinks it could probably be worse. Maybe. *Somehow*.

He’s just not entirely sure how, yet.

He feels a little waterlogged and sluggishly sun-tired as he slaps a bill down on the counter to to pay for all of their shakes, before Steve can even stop him.

“He’ll have strawberry,” Billy says, pointing at Steve. “With some of those cherries on top. I’ll take peanut butter.”

Steve lifts a brow, but he doesn't say anything. He looks a little burnt, a little tired, but content with Lucas and Will shuffled up next to him, Dustin and Mike in chairs tucked at the head of the table, and Max making a face at Billy next to him.

“Can we get fries?” Mike asks. “Like, a *bunch* of them?”

Max elbows Billy. “You gonna order for me, too?”

“If you’re gonna be a brat about it, *yeah*,” Billy says, leaning toward the waitress. “She’ll have --”

Max slams a hand across his shoulder and then shoves at his face. “No, shut up. You have the worst taste. Can I have salted caramel, please?”

Billy rolls his eyes. “And a basket of fries.” He grins at the waitress, in lieu of saying *please*.

“And chocolate for the rest of these losers,” Steve says, and the waitress jots it all down before nodding and smiling and bounding off.

It doesn't take long for their order to come out. Billy still has to suffer through Mike and Dustin and Lucas arguing about whatever campaign they're on. Still has to roll his eyes, only for Will and Steve to laugh as Max does the same.

But then they've got food, they've got shakes, and they're still arguing, but between bites. Steve is smiling, and that's enough for Billy to put up with it. Better, even, when Steve catches his eyes, and nudges at his foot under the table while he sips at his shake.

Billy loops his foot around Steve’s ankle, letting that point of contact anchor him.

“Are you *sure* we can’t sit somewhere else?” Billy asks, rich peanut butter on his tongue.

“Not if *I* have to sit here,” Max says. She looks at him, narrows her eyes, and then looks at Steve. Like she *knows*. Hell, she definitely does. Who is Billy kidding? “Aren’t you going to give him one of your cherries, *Steve*?”

“I dunno,” Steve says, blinking, the picture of innocence as his foot crawls up the inside of Billy's calf. “Do you want my cherry, Billy?”

Billy, mid-swallow of his shake, *chokes*.

Steve just sips at his milkshake. Max wrinkles up her nose.

“You guys are gross,” she mutters, turning away from them, and Steve drags his foot up and down Billy’s calf.

Once he’s regained a bit of composure, Billy shoves at Max. Checking her with his shoulder, but only hard enough to make her grumble and shove back.

“I bought you fries and a shake,” Billy says, instead of *sorry* -- because he’s not.

Because his chest is warm with affection and he’s fighting a blush and he can’t *help it*: he feels good.

“And yeah,” Billy says, slow, as he grins over at Steve. “I’ll take that cherry.”

Instead of offering it out, Steve brings one up to his own lips, bright red covered in whipped cream, and he pops it into his mouth. “Ask me nicely.”

Billy licks his own lips, because he can’t lick Steve’s, as much as he wants to lean over the table in the middle of the diner and just *take*.

He grits his teeth, jaw going tense. He knows Steve is just trying to rile, to tease, but between Steve’s foot and the cherry, Billy’s a goner.

“I’d let you have mine, if I had one,” Billy says, instead of *pretty please*.

Steve hums, tapping his toe to the inside of Billy’s knee. “That's true,”

he says, and slides his glass over.

If the kids weren't here, he'd wait to snag a cherry out of Steve's fingers, maybe even his mouth. But he takes it from the glass instead, fishing it out with lazy fingers. He sucks it into his mouth with a pop, and then licks his fingertips clean.

He doesn't have a cherry for Steve to take, but that sure as hell won't stop Billy from pretending, once he gets Steve alone.

-*-

After, they end up dropping the kids off at the Wheelers'. Billy's surprised he doesn't have to drag Steve away -- he'll usually curl up with the kids in the basement for hours, watching them play -- but when he sees Byers' car in the driveway, Billy figures Steve doesn't want to be a third wheel tonight.

The sun is just starting to sink down when they pull up in front of Steve's. Steve's already out of the Bimmer, leaning against the driver's side door, in his dry swim shorts and the same baggy shirt from the diner. His flip flops are gone, though; Billy thinks he leaves them in his car.

"You hungry?" Steve asks, when he climbs out if the Camaro, like they both don't already know why Billy is there.

"Not *exactly*," Billy says. He's tired from the pool and the sun, but a little jazzed up on sugar. He leans against his Camaro after he closes the door, all nonchalant, like he isn't eyeing Steve's door wondering just how desperate he'd look if he just dragged Steve inside.

"No?" Steve asks, but he's grinning like he knows, following Billy's gaze. "I could order pizza."

Steve is going to be the death of him.

Billy pushes himself off the car and toward Steve. He sways close, then grabs the keys out of Steve's hand, and leads the way to the door.

"Come on, pretty boy. Or are you gonna keep me waiting?"

Steve follows after him, like Billy's got him hooked with his gaze.

When they reach the front door, Steve crowds him. Plasters himself against Billy's back, hands on his hips, and presses his face to Billy's shoulder.

"This okay?" he asks as Billy fumbles the keys.

Billy loses his breath, already a little worked up at just the thought of Steve.

"Yeah," he says, finally, *finally* managing to unlock the door after Steve gets a good feel. A good distraction.

Billy tugs him inside and pushes him up against the door the moment it's closed. "Fuck, I've wanted to kiss you all day."

And so he does.

Steve moans. Lets Billy crowd into him and curls closer still. His fingers tangle into Billy's hair, his mouth opens to him, and he shudders.

Billy loses himself in it, no reason to hold back any longer now that they're behind closed doors. Now that Steve is his and his alone.

"God," Billy pants against Steve's lips. "I wasn't kidding. I want -- I *wish* I could give you my first."

He pushes himself closer to Steve, grinds up against him. Dips his head low and catches Steve's neck between his teeth. Works that skin until Steve makes the most sinful of noises, until he's pleading a little against Billy's hair.

"We could pretend," Billy says, because he can't *stop* himself, because the thought is heady and addictive. "You could be my first, huh?"

Steve *whines,* hands coming to clutch at Billy's shoulders. He arches between him and the door and then stutters back against it, groaning.

"You'll still have to show me how," Steve breathes, cranes his neck over for him and moans. "Don't wanna hurt you."

“You won’t hurt me,” Billy promises. Because Steve is too caring, because he’s too damn sweet, like watermelon on Billy’s tongue. “I’ll help you every step of the way. I promise.”

Billy seals it with a kiss to Steve’s neck, Steve’s heartbeat against his lips.

Steve trembles. Then, he sinks his fingers back into Billy's hair and pulls. Angles his head back, kisses him, and then meets his eyes.

“Bed. Take me to bed and let me have you.”

Billy takes that fucking literally. He hoists Steve up, lifts him until Steve wraps his legs around Billy’s waist, and then Billy turns and carries Steve up the stairs and to his room.

He feels a little dizzy, a little ecstatic that they get to do this. Hell, Billy’s *dreamed* about it, but he never thought he’d get to have Steve like this. Never thought they’d even get this far, after they started.

Steve bounces on the bed when Billy tosses him down and climbs on top of him, straddling those skinny hips.

“Please tell me you’ve got lube, pretty boy,” Billy asks, in between kisses.

“Bedside table,” Steve mumbles, distracted by Billy’s mouth, hands sliding up his thighs.

Billy groans, hands bracketing Steve’s head in so that he can hold himself up. Good. They’ll need that. But right now, all Billy wants to do is kiss Steve. To make this moment last.

Beneath him, Steve melts. He lets out a breathy sound, one Billy wants to hear again and again, and his hands come up to curve against the line of his jaw.

Billy hadn't been joking about pretending. There's something heady about convincing himself that Steve's his first. There's a gentleness to Steve, underneath his sturdiness that Billy loves. There's a tenderness Billy's never had before. Hell, Billy doesn't *need* a first if he has Steve.

He leans into the touch and closes his eyes, kissing deep into Steve's mouth. His fingers itch to touch skin, so he drops his hands down and tugs at Steve's shirt until he's pulling it off, until he can get his hands on Steve's skin.

Steve arches up to help him, breathless and bright eyed, hair a mess once Billy tosses it aside. He takes Billy’s face between his palms again, curving up to meet him halfway, kissing him long and slow.

“You're something else,” Billy says, after he pulls away to catch his breath, panting and already a little strung out.

Billy reaches to the side and pulls out the lube from the bedside table.

“So, are you gonna undress me, or do I gotta do it all by myself?”

Honestly, he'd be more than happy, but it's worth the little indignant look Steve gives him for it.

It's definitely worth the way he shoves up, uses Billy’s surprise to turn him over, to drag his shirt up and over his head, and to catch his mouth again. His palms are fast and smooth down his sides, chest to chest, skin to skin, and Steve curls his fingers into Billy's jeans and tugs.

Pulling back, Steve bites at his chin, fingers dipping along the waistband. He works the fly open, trailing kisses down his throat, over the heaving rise and fall of Billy's chest. There's a hint of teeth against the ladder of his ribs, and Steve pulls away enough to pull Billy free of his pants.

Bunching them up, he tosses them aside, and grins down at him--eyes darting to his own red, red swim shorts, and then Billy’s bare skin. “Huh. Looks like I'm a little overdressed, now.”

Not that Steve's swim shorts really leave much to the imagination at this point. Steve's arousal tents the thin fabric and the sight makes Billy’s mouth water.

They both smell like chlorine and sunscreen. It's overwhelming.

“Looks like you are,” Billy says. “Let me help you with that.”

Billy pushes Steve back down on the bed and dips his fingers under the waistband and tugs, quickly divesting Steve of them so that they're on an even playing field. When they're both bare, heads angled toward the foot of the bed, Billy crowding over Steve, Steve takes a long breath and ghosts his hands up Billy’s sides.

Lets his eyes burn over Billy's chest, and down, and then up over his face. Billy shudders at the warmth there.

Steve's hands come up, curving over Billy's shoulders and then curling behind his neck so his fingers can lace at his nape. So he can coax him down into another kiss.

“You're gorgeous, Billy Hargrove.” Steve says.

“Shove it, pretty boy,” Billy says.

Because it takes one to know one. Because no one's more gorgeous than Steve Harrington.

Billy dips his hand low between them, wraps his fingers around Steve's length, lets his fingers drift over silky soft skin. “God, I want you in me so bad. You have no idea.”

Steve's back arches, hips stuttering up, and he clenches his jaw tight as his hands drop to Billy’s waist. “Tease me like this and you won't get to. I'll finish before we even get started.”

“I'm *pretty* sure I could get you up again, if I had to,” Billy murmurs against Steve's lips, but he takes his hand away, gives Steve some space.

He wants this to be perfect. A good first time -- for them both.

“You're gonna have to work me open with your fingers,” Billy says, grabbing the lube.

Steve's throat works, eyes a little wide, almost like he's scared -- but he takes the bottle when Billy passes it to him, and elbows up until he can kiss Billy’s cheek. “I won't hurt you,” he says.

“I know,” Billy says. “I trust you.”

And the crazy thing is: Billy means it. If this were his first time, he wouldn't be at all concerned, at all scared. Even now, with the thrill of excitement in his gut at the idea of Steve fucking him, he can't find his usual spark of nervousness. All he can find is eager anticipation.

“Get your fingers slick for me,” Billy says, straddling Steve's hips, taking a moment to drag their cocks together.

Steve groans, but does as he's told. Liberally slicks up his fingers and then sits up, Billy practically in his lap, circling both arms around him and kissing him slow.

They rock together, like that, friction teasing at their nerves. Steve moans when Billy licks into his mouth, and Billy feels the cool slide of wet fingers between his cheeks. The gentle glide if slick, of Steve's tentative touch.

He shivers. There's nothing quite like the need burning inside of him. The desire to have Steve inside him is immense.

“Okay,” Billy says, voice wavering. “Now you're gonna push one of your fingers inside me. Slow and steady, alright?”

Steve nods, throat working again, but his fingertips find the tight ring of muscle. He presses, but doesn't press in. Works slick over the heat of him before he ever actually curls a finger inward -- careful.

So goddamn careful.

Jesus. Billy’s already panting by the time Steve presses his finger inside. It always feels so strange, makes him feel so full. It's amazing.

Billy huffs out a noise and moans against Steve's lips, arching his hips a bit to give Steve a better angle, pushes back to get him deeper inside. Greedy.

Steve happily meets his needs. Slides out and then presses more fully in. Eases over muscles and works him over with idle strokes, peppering his mouth with kisses.

“God,” Billy breathes out against Steve's lips. He wants to roll his hips and get Steve deeper, wants *more.* Wants all of Steve. But he knows he has to be patient. But that doesn't stop him from demanding a bit more. “Give me another, baby. Please.”

Steve nods. He's frighteningly nonverbal, maybe too awed or too focused, but he slips in a second finger and eases in slow. Works the muscles loose with slick and steady pressure. Curls them and presses along sensitive heat.

Billy groans. Other than doing this to himself, he hasn't had something like this in so long.

The stretch of two fingers is a lot more than one. It has Billy a little stiff, a little careful. But when Steve curls them and presses, he shudders. Shakes. It feels *so good*. He can feel his cock leaking, and he's so goddamn hard as his hips rock against Steve's.

“You feel so good,” Billy breathes out.

Steve huffs out a little breath, and his arms tighten around him. He dips down and presses his face to Billy’s chest; his ears are red.

“I want --” Steve chokes off a groan, presses deeper, and spreads Billy out. “God, I want you so bad.”

After two becomes enough, after his body has accustomed to the stretch, Billy moans, needy.

“Another,” Billy says, hips rocking down as Steve's fingers piston inside him, as they prep him for something larger. “C’mon. Give me another.” His voice sounds foreign to him, rough and wanton and strung out.

Steve shudders, but nods. He presses his fingers deep, curls them just right, and then withdraws. Adds some extra slick before edging three fingers into him, working his fingertips around tight muscle, then pulling free again -- teasing and testing and stretching.

Steve goes slow, which is good, because the stretch is a little hard, a little much. But Steve is gentle, and for once, Billy isn't trying to push it to the point of pain. Sure, he likes a little burn with his pleasure,

but he wants to make this last. Wants them both to remember this for months, for *years.*

So he lets Steve drag it out. Lets him work him over until he's relaxing into it. Until he's rocking with the motion, watching Steve's jaw clench, feeling him fill him over and over with warm, careful fingers.

“Do you need more?” he asks, voice shaking.

Billy shakes his head, a little past the point of words. He doesn't need more -- not of Steve's fingers, anyway. He *does* need more of *Steve,* though, of that perfect cock stretching him wide.

After a moment, after Steve’s fingers still, Billy can find his voice again.

“Want you. I'm ready.” Billy dips down and presses a kiss to Steve's lips, slow and needy. “For my first time. It'll be perfect.”

Steve moans. Shakes. He works his fingers free and presses his face to Billy’s throat, just breathing.

“Condom?” he asks, voice a wreck, shifting beneath him.

“*Fuck*,” Billy says. He doesn't want to, but he knows they should. “Do you have one?”

But Billy's already digging in the bedside table for something in a shiny wrapper. He comes up victorious, pulling out a string of them and ripping one free.

Steve takes it, kisses him, and tears the package open. He shuffles a little between Billy's legs, reaching between them so he can roll it on, hissing a little-- cock heavy and full, hard with his want. With his desire for Billy.

It kind of spins Billy’s head.

“You wanna do it like this?” Steve asks, tentative and attentive.

“Yeah,” Billy says, breathless with want. “Just like this, wanna ride

you.”

He wants to see Steve's face, wants to have Steve writhing underneath him.

Billy slides his hands over Steve's pecs, feeling the sweat on his skin. Feeling Steve's heartbeat underneath his fingertips.

“Get yourself nice and slick for me, baby,” Billy says.

Steve shudders again, just for him. Leans up and kisses him before pulling away enough to fumble with the lube.

He's generous with it -- probably more than he needs to be -- but Billy isn't going to complain. He waits until Steve is shiny with slick before knocking his hand away, shuffling forward and pressing Steve down onto the mattress.

It doesn't take even a second for Billy to reach down and steady Steve's cock underneath him. He lets out a breath, a little shaky, a little surprised to find that there's a thrum of nervousness in his stomach. A little excitement.

Billy doesn't let that stop him, though. He lowers himself down, until Steve is pressing against him. Until Billy can begin to feel the stretch of Steve breaching him.

Steve's hands fly to his hips. He doesn't pull, doesn't coax, but he squeezes. Holds on and breathes out slow, eyes burning over Billy's face, and then darting *down*.

“*Jesus*,” Steve hisses, and Billy can see the way he winds tight like a spring, the way he forces himself completely still beneath him -- can see the way he gives over, jaw falling loose, gasping in a breath as Billy eases down more, Steve's cock filling him *just right*. “God, Billy.”

Words escape him again.

Billy just groans, no need to be quiet in Steve's bedroom. It's kind of freeing, being able to just be himself, to let loose.

He can't stop himself from sinking down more, a little too fast, the

stretch a little *too much* -- until Steve is fully seated inside him. Until Billy is gasping and panting and groaning, loud.

If feels unbelievable. It feels amazing. It feels *perfect*.

"*Steve,"* Billy breathes out.

Steve's gasping beneath him. Petting down his thighs and back up to his hips, trying not to buck but rutting up into him slow before forcing himself still again. Shaking. Muscles jumping.

His thumbs drag slow circles over the crease of his thighs. He tries to steady his breath, closes his eyes, and bites off a groan.

"Easy, sweetheart." Steve breathes. "There's no rush. Take what you need -- I'll give it to you."

Billy breathes out a laugh.

"Everything. Jesus, Steve, I want everything." Billy grinds down, and it feels like he takes Steve even deeper. Like he's even more full. Even though he didn't think it was possible.

Slowly, Billy starts to rock. Pleasure spikes and he shudders.

And Steve -- Steve meets him. Rolls his hips up just as slow, moves with him, under him.

"Then I'll give you everything," Steve says.

A shuddering breath escapes Billy as Steve's hips roll -- and that's it. He can't take it.

Rough hands push down against Steve's pecs, shoving Steve down against the sheets so that Billy can balance himself, so that he can get some leverage. Effortlessly, his movements switch from slow to needy, hips rolling back before he lifts himself up again, like he just can't get enough of Steve. Like he needs Steve to fill him again and again and *again*.

Steve will give him everything, and Billy'll take it, too, riding Steve until they're both a mess.

Steve gasps out. Groans for him, long and low, the muscles in his abdomen winding tight as he bucks up. His face twists up as Billy rocks, as Billy ruts down. He clutches at his hips, trying to meet his rhythm, but his eyes are wide and so dark as he stares up at him.

Billy gets a hand on Steve's face, cupping his cheek. Half steadying himself, half steadying Steve. He leans down to kiss Steve, not even breaking his rhythm.

“You with me, pretty boy?” Billy asks, after he's had his fill of Steve's mouth, after he needs to take a break to breathe and pant against those lips.

“Yeah,” Steve breathes, panting against his lips, hand curling over the back of his head and fingers sinking into his hair as he kisses him again -- anchoring his heels into the bed, canting his hips up to better move with him. “Yeah, god, Billy. You feel so good. You're so fucking *perfect*.”

When Steve thrusts up, just right, Billy can't help but moan and rock down, until Steve is buried deep inside. He keeps it up, Steve's cock hitting him *just right*.

“Nah. Pretty -- pretty sure that's you,” Billy manages, because it's so true, because Steve is ruining him. Making it all feel too good, too perfect. “Just like that, c’mon, babe. *Fuck me*,” Billy says, though he doesn't leave it all up to Steve: Billy rides him like he just can't get enough.

Steve huffs out a whine of a sound, straining a bit and flexing to meet him. There's sweat on his face, on his skin, and his jaw is tight as he grunts and drives up and in. Bucks pointedly, just to make Billy gasp.

Billy loses himself in it for a while. In Steve, in the pleasure, in the sensation of being taken. Of having Steve fill him completely.

When Steve's hips snap up hard, *perfectly,* Billy nearly shouts. Nearly comes right there.

“Not gonna last,” Billy says, fingers moving into Steve's hair.

“Thank god,” Steve huffs, grinning, repeating the motion again --

then again. “C'mon. Come for me, sweetheart.”

Billy doesn't even need a hand.

All he needs is Steve pounding into him, Steve filling him, Steve calling him *sweetheart* for him to break. The pleasure builds and builds, spiking into something white hot and all-encompassing, a rush of it hitting Billy like a wave.

He moans as he spills himself between them, painting Steve's chest with it as he pistons down, fucking himself on Steve's cock through it all.

Steve surges up, wrapping his arms around him, rocking him through it until they’re both gasping. His hands slide, big and smooth, up his spine. He presses kisses all along Billy's shoulder, hips rutting slower, breath shorter as Billy clenches around him.

Billy leans into Steve, into the steadiness of those hands. Every thrust feels like it's a little too much, but he can't stop himself, can't slow down until Steve's there, too.

“C’mon, baby,” Billy says leaning down to kiss Steve. It's messy and heated, more tongue than finesse, but it's *hot* and Steve feels so good inside him. “*Please,*” Billy urges against his lips.

Steve's hips stutter once, twice. He moans, breathless and helpless, against his mouth -- and Billy feels the moment he breaks when he shakes, stuttering up under him.

Billy rides him through it, kissing the hell out of Steve until they're both breathless. Until Billy’s eaten all of his sweet noises up.

It's not quite as satisfying as feeling Steve's come fill him, but it's nearly as good, when Billy pulls back to look at Steve's face, at the way he looks wrecked and sated all at once.

“Fuck,” Billy says hips slowing until he's rocking ever so slightly on Steve's cock, a little greedy for the way it makes both of them jump. At each little twinge of *too much* it gives him.

Steve hums, tucking his face against Billy's jaw, just breathing. They

move through the aftershocks, Steve holding Billy close, and Steve nips at the heat of his pulse.

“Was it good?” he asks, voice a shaky mess.

Billy laughs, because he can't *not*. He props himself up on Steve's chest, giving him ample access to his neck. Because he can, because it feels good. Because it's *Steve*.

“The best,” Billy says, and means it. “You sure know how to show a guy a good first time, King Steve.”

Steve laughs against his throat; Billy can feel the smile he presses there. “Honestly, I was just trying not to come the second I was in you.”

“Well, you did a damn good job.”

Truth be told, Billy already knows he’ll remember this better than his first. He knows, stupidly, that *this moment* will be seared into his memory for forever.

So he makes the most of it. He loops his arms around Steve and rolls them both, until Steve is on top of him, Steve sliding out of him in process. Until Billy can wrap his arms firmly around Steve and just *hold him*.

Steve shudders into his arms, curls into him, and presses his mouth to the line of Billy's throat. “Thank you. That was -- for everything today. That was -- thank you.”

“Uh huh,” Billy says, because Steve deserves he works, he thinks, and Billy would give that to him if he could. “You gonna give me a hickey, baby? So all the girls know I'm yours?”

“Don't tempt me,” Steve says, but he's smiling again, and then licking up the line of his throat.

Billy shouldn't tempt him. He knows better. But he *wants* it, too. Wants there to be something of Steve's that lingers for a little too long, instead of just the memories.

He shivers under Steve's tongue, skin over-sensitive and hot.

“I wouldn't mind,” Billy says, hand settling at the small of Steve's back.

He rolls his hips up a little and gasps, indulgent and greedy. Steve's breath catches in his ear, and is his hips crane back and away.

Pulling back, nose wrinkled up, Steve pulls the condom off, knots it, and tosses it toward his trashcan. Then, he settles back onto Billy with a sigh, pressing his face back to his neck.

“You'd really let me?” Steve asks. “Mark you like that? Let everyone see?”

“How about I'm *asking* you to,” Billy says, foolishly. Sounding braver than the hammering of his heart feels.

Steve licks at his throat. Kisses his pulse. Bites into his skin. Hard enough to bruise. Hard enough to make Billy jerk and arch up as Steve grinds against him.

It shouldn't feel so good. But it's not just Steve's teeth on him, his lips or his tongue -- it's knowing that, for this moment, this summer, he belongs to Steve.

Billy whines, pulling Steve tight so he can rock his hips up against him, panting.

“*Steve,”* Billy manages, feeling dizzy, feeling strung out. Feeling so affectionate it hurts.

“Shh,” Steve kisses the bruise, hands soothing down his sides. “I got you, sweetheart.”

Billy doesn't know how exactly he's supposed to express himself, how he's supposed to *deal* with this. He shouldn't feel seconds from shaking apart again, but he's there, somehow, anyway.

Steve is right there meeting him as Billy ruts up against him, cock, somehow hard again, sliding through sweat and some of his own come. His hands grapple against Steve’s back, nails digging into hot

skin.

Steve's breath is hot and short against his throat. The ghost of a kiss. Steve rocks with him, pulls back so he isn't hiding anymore, and stares down at Billy as friction lights up between them.

“You're so damn beautiful,” Steve says, and he sounds like he means it.

Billy feels himself shatter. It's not nearly as powerful, as all encompassing as his earlier orgasm, but it's enough to get him panting, groaning, hips shaking against Steve’s. It's not really him, to fall apart at such softness -- but Steve's his weakness, he knows.

Still reeling, still shaking, Billy gets a hand between them, through come and sweat, and wraps his fingers around Steve.

“C’mon, baby,” Billy says. “You gonna come again for me?”

“Jesus,” Steve pants, rutting into his slick palm. “*Jesus*, yeah.”

He rocks into Billy's grip, times it with his strokes, gripping Billy’s hips as he moves. He rests his forehead to Billy’s, gasping between them, and cries out, soft and shaking, as he spills out over Billy's fingers.

“Fuck,” Billy says, out of breath and dizzy. But he feels *so good.* “That was -- that was fucking something.”

He wraps his arms tight around Steve and buries his face in that warm space of his neck and just breathes Steve in, surrounds himself in it. Steve shifts against him, another hum welling up from his chest, breath coming sharp from his nose. He goes boneless over Billy. Heavy.

Curls into his arms and shivers. “I think you're actively trying to kill me.”

“Not *actively*,” Billy says.

He reaches up, buries his fingers in Steve’s hair, and just lets himself float for a while.

“But you’re gonna crush *me*,” Billy says, after Steve gets heavy, after Billy starts to come back into himself. “I’m gonna *die*,” Billy says with a huff.

Steve snorts. “Shouldn't’ve dragged me on top of you, then. You're stuck with me, now.”

Billy whines -- but he has no real complaints. Stuck under Steve like this, with his weight pressing Billy into the mattress -- well, he feels fucking *safe*. He feels grounded. He feels protected. It’s stupid -- Billy can stand up for himself in just about any situation, but he can’t help but like this, knowing that right now, he doesn’t *have* to protect himself. He doesn’t have to keep watch.

“The worst,” Billy says, and presses his lips to Steve’s neck, fingers sliding over Steve’s sweat-slick back.

It feels so real, so perfect.

And then Steve opens his mouth.

“Stay the night,” Steve breathes, cuddles closer. “Wake up with me.”

He shouldn’t. He *can’t*. It’s pretty much the worst idea ever.

“Okay,” Billy says, because he has no sense of self preservation. Because he’s greedy for this moment to never end. “But only if we shower, first.”

Steve's head pops up, hair flying everywhere, and he's *beaming*. “Deal.”

“You know I’m only using you for your shower,” Billy says, but he catches Steve in a kiss, anyway. Because, for whatever *fucking reason,* he needs Steve to know that that’s not the case.

“Yeah,” Steve says, curving a hand along his jaw, kissing him again. “I know.”

-*-

Billy wakes slowly, morning light pouring over his face.

There's no confusion as to where he is: he's warm and he's safe and he's *happy*. There's no question: he's with Steve.

Billy rolls and stretches out next to Steve, a content hum in his throat as he pushes himself up against that warmth. It's something else, waking up next to Steve Harrington -- like a goddamn dream come true.

Steve shifts against him and Billy pulls him closer, blinking open his eyes into the pale light of the room. It takes him a minute to focus, for his eyes to settle on Steve in front of him. And when they do, Billy can't help but chuckle.

Steve's shoulders are bright red. Even without the best light, it's easy to tell.

It explains why Steve's so *warm*, too.

"Baby," Billy says, fingers at Steve's waist. He doesn't *have* to wake him up -- but he kind of wants to, too. "You're burnt to hell."

Steve grumbles and presses his face to Billy's chest. Billy feels his arm tighten around him, lazy and weak, and an ankle hooks behind his.

"M'not. S'fine."

It's sweet as hell, Steve cuddling up to him like this. Sweeter than the watermelon he licked off his fingers, sweeter than the cherry he stole from Steve's sundae.

Billy moves, pressing his lips to cherry red skin.

Steve hisses, squirming against him, and a hand wiggles free to press at Billy's chin -- pushing his face away. "*Ow*."

Billy laughs, because it's funny, and it's fucking endearing, too.

"Told you so, baby. You want some aloe for that?"

"I don't --" Steve groans, turns over, and winces. "Dustin used the last of it last time he was here."

Billy hums, a thoughtful contemplative noise. “Want me to go get you some?”

Jesus, he’s in deep.

Steve blinks over at him and smiles, dopey and tired with sleep. Even his nose is a little burnt.

“You'd do that?”

“Yeah,” Billy says, after a second. A little surprised at *himself*.

He’s not the kind of guy to fall for someone like this, to bend over backwards just to make someone smile. And yet.

“You look like you need it,” Billy says. He presses a slow kiss to Steve’s nose. Gentle.

Steve hums, tilts his face up, and offers his mouth instead. “That'd be nice. Or we could use ice. Or vinegar. But then I'd smell bad.”

“I'll go get you some aloe, King Steve,” Billy says. He pushes himself away, just a little bit. Starting the process. “I can bring you back a milkshake.”

Steve catches him around the middle, reels him back, and kisses him. “Just… come back?”

Billy huffs out a laugh and kisses Steve back, smiling against his lips before pulling away again. “*Obviously,* I will. What am I supposed to do with *aloe*?”

“Hoard it all for yourself?”

“Don't give me ideas,” Billy says, rolling himself out of bed.

He shucks on a pair of basketball shorts he finds after some rummaging and a *Hawkins ‘82 Homecoming* shirt he finds in Steve's drawers. All of it smells like Steve.

“Go back to sleep, your highness. I'll be back faster that way.” A kiss, and Billy's out the door.

-*-

The trip to the store is a short one. He grabs the aloe, grabs some rocky road and some strawberry ice cream, and a canister of whipped cream that he uncaps and takes a mouthful of before he even gets to the checkout counter.

Thinks about curling up with Steve, skin on skin, all day. Of plying him with sweets and sex, of soothing his burns to make up for all the times Steve's soothed his hurt.

That's where Max finds him, trotting up to his Camaro with a bag full of shit for Steve. She shouts his name, rolls up on her skateboard, and slams his door shut before he can even get it properly open.

She's sweaty. Hair tied back, face flush. If he didn't know any better, he'd say she was worried, considering the pinch of her mouth.

“Where *were* you?” she asks. “Jonathan had to drop me off last night. Do you know how pissed your dad is?”

“*Shit,”* Billy says, because he hadn't thought. Had been too preoccupied. It's a little like a hammer, straight to the glass of his fantasy. Knocking it all to pieces. “Nowhere. I was nowhere. You're fine, right?”

Max's face scrunches up, and she reaches out to pluck at Billy's shirt -- *Steve's* shirt. “Were you at *Steve's*? Billy, how could you be so *stupid* --?”

“No,” Billy says, blood burning hot, ears ringing. “*No,* I -- *fuck!”*

He shouts, hand slamming down on his car roof. Because he can't lie. Because she fucking knows and there's no use pretending otherwise. Because if she knows, well, Neil knows *something.*

Max flinches back. Purses her lips up and crosses her arms.

Like she's worried that rage might come her way.

“He doesn't know, Billy. I lied and said you were partying at the quarry.” Max says. “But running around town in *Steve's clothes* with

a-- a *hickey* isn't exactly *subtle*. And I have *friends* here, Billy. You *can't* ruin this for me. Not like last time."

"Oh, I can't ruin this for *you*, Maxine?" Billy snarls, and maybe it's a little mean, but the anger is easier to hold onto than the despair. The fear. The disappointment. "I'm sorry this is so *inconvenient* for you. That must be *tough."*

"You don't even *like it* here, Billy!" Max says, eyes wide, cheeks pink. "And you don't have to *stay*. I *have* to go if they decide to go. You *don't.*"

And she's right. He fucking *hates* it here. But he said he'd stick around for the summer for Max. And now there's Steve.

"Look," Billy declares a little. "They're not gonna go anywhere."

"But they *might*," she insists, and Billy blinks at the sudden furious, terrified tears that well in her eyes, as her chin breaks, as her voice wobbles. "If Neil finds out, he'll make us move again. He *will*. You know he will."

And Billy knows that's right, too. Neil's voice rings in his head, clear as a fucking bell.

I'm not gonna live somewhere where everyone knows I've got a faggot for a son.

He hasn't forgotten that night. Has a scar on his brow to remember it by.

He knows she's right. That Neil's pride trumps everything else.

"I *like it* here, Billy." Max says, and she's crying, scrubbing at her face like she's trying to stop it. "Don't -- *please*, just don't ruin it."

"Take this, then," Billy says, shoving the bag at her after fishing out the aloe, feeling hollow and burnt out, like a shell. "Go get sugar high with your friends. I'll see you at dinner, okay?"

Max sniffles, but looks in the bag, eyes going wide when she spots the ice cream. She looks back up at Billy, lips pursed again, but not in

annoyance.

In worry.

“What're you gonna do?”

Billy bites his lip. “I'm going to give this to Harrington, because he's burnt to hell. And then I'm going to go apologize to my dad. Go, Max.”

Billy nods his head off in the direction of the arcade or somewhere that's anywhere but here.

Max hesitates. Then, she darts forward, wrapping her arms around him in a crushing squeeze.

“I'm sorry,” she says. “Thanks, Billy.”

And then she's gone. Kicking off on her skateboard, clutching the bag close, and not looking back.

-*-

Billy lets himself into Steve's house and trudges upstairs with his heart in his throat. He's ten seconds from panicking, fifteen from outright anger. But he's still here, because he needs to be. Because he can't just not come back. He promised. Basically.

He doesn't knock, just lets himself into Steve's room and starts shucking his clothes. Steve's clothes.

Steve rouses slow. Billy's already halfway dressed again when he props himself up onto his elbows.

“Hey. You're back already.”

His hair is a goddamn mess. It's sticking up everywhere. There's a crease from the pillow on his cheek. He smiles when he sees him, sleepy and lazy and --

And Billy wants to kiss him. Wants to crawl back into bed with him. Wants to feel safe again.

But he can't. He *can't.*

It takes a second. For Steve to really focus. For Steve to narrow in on the tight lines of his shoulders, the rigid way he moves, the sharp way he does up his fly.

He sits up properly then. His smile disappears. He looks at Billy like he *knows* what's coming. Like he's bracing for it.

“You're leaving,” he says.

“I have to go home,” Billy says, because he can't lie. He doesn't *want* to.

He grabs the bottle of aloe and sets it in Steve's hand.

Steve catches his wrist. “*Billy*.”

He says his name like a plea. Like he's a second from begging.

Billy doesn't think he's strong enough to listen to Steve beg.

But Steve doesn't. He takes a shuddering breath and his shoulders droop and he nods.

“Okay,” he says, uncurling his fingers, and he nods again -- like he's assuring Billy *it's okay* when it isn't. None of it is. “Okay. I'll -- I guess I'll see you? Around? With the kids.”

“Yeah,” Billy says, so brutally, heart wrenchingly grateful that Steve is giving him this. That he doesn't have to *explain* what they both already know. “I'll see you around,” Billy says.

He pulls his arm away from Steve's grasp and doesn't look back when he closes the door to Steve's room.

In the car, he gives himself sixty seconds to scream, to shout himself hoarse and curse, before he starts the engine and heads home.

-*-

The hot summer days slog on slowly without Steve there to speed

them up, without something nice eating up Billy's time.

The heat of Indiana *sucks* with bruises on his face and pain in his ribs.

Without school, Neil has no real excuse to keep anything tame, to keep those angry fists away from Billy's face. No reason to keep the bruises small. Billy had faced Neil's wrath after coming home from Steve's, trying desperately to hold onto the feeling of happiness, of *comfort* he had felt not so long ago. But it was hard, with Neil throwing accusations and names at his face, followed by brutal punches and curses that did their part of tearing Billy open from the inside.

He had denied all of it, because of course he had. Because Steve is more important than his pride. Because *Max* is. Because Billy can take it -- he always does. It's nothing new.

Eventually, *eventually*, Neil had let it go.

Billy had crawled into the shower afterward, had washed away all the blood under the lukewarm and inconsistent trickle of water. And he had let himself cry. Not for the pain, not for the injustice of it -- but for the loss of Steve, for the *look* on Steve's face.

He avoids Steve after that.

For everyone's safety.

It's easy, unfortunately. Because Steve is always five steps away, just out of reach. Because Steve is *busy*, always running from one place to the next, never staying still. Because Steve will barely even *look* at him.

Which Billy notices, of course, because he can't stop himself from staring at Steve.

He catches Steve staring just once. Right after that day with the aloe, with Neil's rage. Billy's face is still swollen, still red, and he's still tender around the edges. He blames it on the pain in his face, in his chest, but he knows it's deeper than that -- he just doesn't want to dwell. Steve looks at him and frowns, eyes going dark and a little sad. Billy tilts his chin up, clenches his teeth, and nods. Steve looks away.

They see each other in groups. When Billy drops Max off at the arcade, he's almost always there. Sometimes Billy lingers, sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes he's at the pool, too, but Billy never stays there. If anything, he goes out to the quarry and parties it up. Jumps in the dirty water high as a kite and drinks until he's numb.

They don't talk, they barely acknowledge each other. It's not unfriendly. If anything, it feels a little like Steve is being *kind*. Like he's going for a clean cut. Like he knows Billy *can't*.

The end of summer bash is at the Byers'. Billy doesn't like to spend much time there and *hasn't*, not since that weird night in the fall that left them all reeling.

He fully intends to just drop Max off. He doesn't expect her to tug on his sleeve and say: "Aren't you coming?"

Billy just gives her a look, like she's dumber than he thought. "Uh, *no?* Why would I?"

"Because you're *leaving*," Max says.

And Billy doesn't get it. She can't have it both ways. He can't just cut in and out whenever she wants him to. Because, despite trying to pretend otherwise, Billy's not that sturdy. Not that capable.

But he remembers being her age. He remembers wanting everything, all at once. He remembers putting himself first, *all the time*, and not necessarily understanding the impact that had on the people around him. And he thinks, at least just for one night, being there for her is more important than the pain of having to brush shoulders with Steve Harrington one last time.

So, he throws his car into park behind a beat up junker and tells her he's leaving after an hour.

He's seen Joyce Byers maybe three times up close. Still, she greets him with a smile and a warm welcome, and ushers them both inside.

"Max, sweetie, the kids are all outside. Hopper's got the barbeque going."

“Is El--?”

“She's out there,” Joyce says.

Max darts off.

Billy wants to strangle her. But then Joyce looks at him, a funny smile on her face.

“I think Jonathan and Steve are sneaking weed out in the shed,” she says. “If that's the kind of thing you're interested in.”

He is. And he isn’t.

The thought of taking some of the edge off is immensely appealing, but the thought of having to look at Steve, to stand so close to him when he already factored in *not* doing that into his day? It’s a little much. He also isn’t particularly interested in dealing with the easy way Jonathan and Steve are with each other. Their somewhat rocky history at some point smoothed into something seamless -- and for that, Billy’s a little jealous.

“Do -- you need any help?” The words are out of his mouth before he can even realize it. Before he can own up to the fact that he’d rather *hide in the kitchen* than deal with the crushing feeling in his chest.

Joyce blinks at him, and then her face softens and she pats him on the shoulder. “Sure. I'm just finishing up the macaroni salad. You can help me with that.”

She leads him to the kitchen. It's a mess. Nothing like the sleek lines of Steve's, or the military cleanliness kept in his own, but Joyce doesn't seem bothered by it.

She putters around, telling Billy what to chop up and how, smiling and peppering him with small questions -- about his summer, what he's doing when it's over, what type of music he listens to -- *my boy Jonathan has such a broad taste, but he's always complaining about what's on the radio* -- and Billy settles into it. Cuts up onion and celery and tomato while she mixes a thick sauce over the macaroni.

He actually thinks he might make it through this when the back door

clatters open, Jonathan padding in and talking over his shoulder at someone. At Steve.

“-- can always just stay the night *here*,” he's saying. “I don't know how many times we have to invite you. There three insomniacs under one roof, one more won't change much.”

“Yeah, because staying at *your place* will keep me from screaming myself awake,” Steve scoffs. “I'd have a panic attack just walking down the fucking hall at night --”

“Boys,” Joyce says, a bit sharp, like she's chiding them both for not realizing Billy’s there, that they shouldn't be talking about whatever it is they're talking about.

Jonathan looks forward and stops, brows up. Behind him Steve has gone still.

Months ago, Billy would’ve sneered something mean, something biting. Weeks ago, he would’ve even offered Steve a smile -- before pulling him aside and crowding close into a dark corner. Now, Billy’s got *no goddamn idea* what to do with himself.

So, he just scoops up the pieces of diced onion and throws them into the bowl, breaking eye contact with Jonathan. Barely even looking at Steve.

Billy’s face is too warm, his body too tight. The kitchen feels way too small, way too claustrophobic, even for how homey it is.

He sets down the knife, brushes his hands off on his jeans, and steps back. “I was just leaving.”

Joyce looks at him. “You aren't staying for the barbeque?”

Billy's about to say *no*. About to excuse himself.

Steve beats him to it.

“I left the sweet rolls out in my car, Mrs. Byers.” He says, avoiding Billy’s eyes, brushing by Jonathan. “I'm gonna go grab ‘em before Hop has my head.”

And then he's gone, walking out of the kitchen, beating a retreat out the front door. Giving Billy space he didn't even need to ask for.

The room is way too quiet after Steve leaves, the slam of the front door practically echoing in Billy's ears, even from a room away.

Billy doesn't even bother looking at Jonathan. He knows the expression he'll find on his face -- likely, a scowl, if he knows *anything* that happened. Which he could. Steve could've told him, or he very easily could've guessed. It's not like, despite everything, they were exactly *careful*. It's not like this didn't make it incredibly obvious.

Billy grits his teeth together, grabs another stalk of celery, and picks his knife back up.

"Looks like I don't have anywhere to be after all."

Joyce's mouth presses thin, but she nods. "A fine chop," she reminds him.

Jonathan excuses himself a second later. Disappears down the hall; doesn't come back for a while.

When he does, it's with an armful of water pistols. Joyce smiles at him as he goes by. Billy can hear the excitement from the backyard when he steps outside.

Steve doesn't come back in.

Billy wants to throw something. Wants to smash a plate like he did last time he was in this kitchen. Instead, he pulverizes the celery under his knife, teeth clenched so hard he feels like they might crack under the pressure.

"*Fuck,*" he says under his breath, because it doesn't *matter*.

None of it matters. He'll be gone from this place sooner than he can blink and it's *still* eating him up inside.

"I should go," he says to himself, to Joyce, to the empty space around him.

Even though he doesn't *want* to go. He wants to fix things when they can't be fixed.

Joyce looks at him, setting a large mixing bowl onto the counter next to him, and she nods. "Okay. Thank you for your help, Billy. It was nice to finally meet you."

Billy puts the celery into the bowl and drops the cutting board and the knife into the sink.

"Sorry about your kitchen," he says, because he never apologized about that, either. "Back in the fall."

With that, he lets himself out of the house, escaping from the small space and his own thoughts, and sucks in deep breaths of air once the door closes behind him. It's not really any better outside, the heat still tangible and the noise of the party even louder than before. But it doesn't matter. He fumbles with a pack of cigarettes, lighting up before he drags his keys out of his pocket.

Three more steps to his car and he would've made it.

Max stops him, El standing next to her side.

"You can't *go*, Billy," Max says. "There's going to be sparklers."

Billy snarls. He can't help it -- he feels so torn up, so worn jaggedly thin at this point.

"You have to *pick one*, Maxine. You want this?" he gestures to the yard, to all of the kids playing. "You can have it. But I'm not a part of it."

Max looks like she's going to say more. To argue. El stops her with a hand on her arm.

"He went back around to the shed," El looks at him, stares *through* him. "He thinks you don't want to see him."

Max's face pinches up. "*El--"*

It rubs Billy a little bit the wrong way. "Oh that's *perfect*," Billy says,

hands clenching into fists at his side. “Just how many of your little friends know my business?” he says, to Max.

“I didn't tell her anything!”

El’s nose wrinkles up. She reaches out and snags Billy by the wrist, tugging.

“You're supposed to make the monsters go away,” she says. “Not the real ones. Just his.”

Billy doesn’t have the energy for this. It’s a foregone conclusion that he’s going to leave this town and everyone in it behind him.

He wants to wrench his hand away, but he knows better than to mess with one of Max’s friends. Not that he necessarily fears her wrath, but there’s no point in ruining anything for her. At least *she* can have a happy life here. Or as close to *happy* as anyone can get in Hawkins, Indiana.

He pauses for a second, taking a couple breaths. “That’s not going to happen, kid.”

When she doesn’t let go, he just sighs.

“If I go talk to him before I leave, will you let me go?”

“Yes,” she says, with a finality he's never really seen in a kid her age. “You helped him with the water. You'll help him again.”

Max looks at her. “*What*? When did he --?”

El just smiles, serene and sure, tugging at Billy's wrist again. “Come on.”

Billy looks at Max, who only shrugs. Her look says that there’s no use in fighting this kid.

Which is exactly how Billy ends up letting this *random girl* drag him behind a shed in the overgrown backyard of the Byers’. It’s how he finds Steve, smoking another joint and looking like he’s been ambushed once his eyes fall on Billy and the two girls bracketing him

like he might run away at any given second.

They're not exactly *wrong* to assume that, because the look on Steve's face makes him want to hightail it out of there faster than ever.

Steve sets the blunt aside, shoulders bunched. "El. You can't do this shit."

El frowns at him. "You need --"

"It doesn't *matter* what I need."

Billy wants to leave. He shifts on his feet, like he's trying to figure out the easiest way out of here, but Max steps in closer next to him and -- apparently -- El's grip tightens on his wrist.

"You two are being *babies*," Max says.

Billy bristles. "You *know* why --" Billy starts, but then stops, deflating almost instantly.

Steve rolls his eyes, head tipping back, and he crosses his arms over his chest. "Jesus christ, *fine.* Give us a minute."

"No cheating," El warns, letting Billy go, and Max actually shoves him.

"Yeah, because you have a lot of room to talk about cheating." Steve snaps, but El is still smiling. "Go. Go on, losers."

They dart off, before Billy or Steve can change their mind. Steve plucks up his joint, gaze dropping to his toes, and he drags hard and holds it for a long time.

When he exhales, he finally meets Billy's eyes. He looks tired. Looks like he hasn't gotten a good night's sleep since the beginning of August.

"Give it a couple of minutes, and it should be safe to go. El won't bug you again."

Billy wants nothing more than to crowd Steve into his arms and just

hold him. It's nearly impossible to ignore. So, instead, he plucks the joint straight out of Steve's fingers and takes a drag.

The silence between them feels uncomfortable and brittle for too long. Billy eventually breaks it.

"I'm sorry," he says, even though it's not his normal thing, apologizing. But the thought of leaving without saying it *hurts*.

Steve looks at him, dry and tired. "It's okay, Billy."

Billy laughs, a short and barked out noise. "Don't *lie*, Harrington."

Steve's mouth presses into a thin line. "What would you rather I do? Get mad at you? I'm not mad at you, Billy. I get it."

"Uh huh," Billy says. "Then why do you look worse than before, huh? You didn't look this bad before we --" he cuts himself off, but Steve'll know.

He'll know.

"What? You didn't think I'd be a little broken hearted watching you leave?" Steve asks, smile soft, shrugging a shoulder. "I apparently don't wear breakups well."

Billy doesn't even bother arguing that it wasn't a breakup. That they weren't a thing. Because as much as he tried to pretend they weren't, as much as he tried to pretend that they we just fooling around, he knows better. And Steve does too. Steve -- got there first.

"I'm a shitty first boyfriend, huh?" Billy hears himself say.

Steve shrugs again. "I don't think so. I never expected you to stay, Billy. But that doesn't mean I didn't want you to."

Billy passes the joint back to Steve after taking another hit. The words are kinder than Billy deserves, really.

"I can't stay. I was never going to," he says. He wishes, though, that he could.

“I know,” Steve says, drags hard and lets it out slow. “It's okay, Billy.”

It’s really not okay.

“Less than a week,” Billy says. “When Max starts school up again, I’m hitting the road.”

It doesn’t feel right to not tell Steve, even though he already knows.

“Back to California, huh?”

“Yeah,” Billy breathes out, leaning on the shed for support. “Look,” he says, after a moment. “This isn’t how I wanted it to --”

“I *know*,” Steve sighs, shifts on his feet and faces him, flicks the blunt away and crosses his arms. “You don't have anything to apologize for, Billy. It's *okay* --”

“But I *want* to. Jesus, Steve,” Billy says, pushing off the shed and taking a step toward him. He reaches out, fingers going for Steve’s upper arms because he can’t stop himself. “This is all I’ve ever --” Billy’s stomach twists. “I bought ice cream, that morning. The expensive whipped cream and everything, too.”

Steve shudders out a breath. Leans into his touch like no one has laid hands on him since Billy.

He closes his eyes.

“But you're not staying,” Steve says, voice tight. “You're not staying and I wouldn't ask you to. So I'm telling you it's okay.”

It’s too damn kind, because *Steve* is too damn kind. Billy knows he’s leaving. Knows he can’t stay. But he can’t just leave like this, not now. It’s not fair, and it’s not okay -- no matter how much Steve says it is.

“You’re not *fucking hearing me*,” Billy says, and the words feel fat and strange on his tongue. Like they’re choking him up. “I need you to know -- you’ve *gotta know* -- that I --”

The words stop, stuck in his throat.

Steve finally looks at him. His smile, when he offers it, breaks.

He takes Billy's face in between his hands. Thumbs at the lines of his cheeks. Billy leans blindly into that touch.

"I know," Steve says, leaning in, catching the corner of Billy's mouth. "I know. Me too."

Billy shouldn't, but he does. He leans into that touch, crumbles underneath the feeling of Steve's fingers on old bruises, on the ghost of breath over his lips. He closes the miniscule distance between the of them and kisses Steve, soft and easy, like he means it. Like the moment is perfect, even though it's far from it.

Steve makes a sound. Shakes against him and shuffles closer. Pulls back just to kiss him again.

Billy wishes he could blame his dizziness on the weed, but he can't. It's all Steve. He wraps his arms around Harrington and pulls, until Billy's leaning up against the side of the shed, Steve pulled close, kisses turned desperate.

"Billy," Steve says, and it sounds like *I love you*, and he kisses him; his lips, his chin, his jaw, his cheek. "*Billy."*

It sounds like *don't go* and *stay*, but Steve will never say it. Would never ask that of him, even if he wants it.

It's a surprise, when Billy finds his eyes burning with the threat of tears. It only makes him pull Steve closer, makes him kiss him harder.

I love you, I love you, I love you, Billy thinks, knowing it's too unfair to say out loud, even though Steve knows. Even though they both know.

Billy gets one of his hands on Steve's cheek, like if he holds Steve there for long enough he can just lose himself in this moment forever. Like he'll never heave to leave and never have to stay.

But it can't. Billy can't.

Life doesn't work like that.

Outside the shed, Hopper calls something about supper. Steve pulls back, breath short, forehead resting to Billy's.

They stay like that, clinging to each other like that, for a long moment that draws out as they breathe against each other.

"Promise me --" Steve clears his throat, jaw winding under Billy's touch. "Promise me you'll say goodbye. That you won't just disappear."

"I promise," Billy says, pressing one last kiss, light and barely there, to Steve's lips before he pulls back. "I promise."

-*-

He doesn't hear the front door open.

He's got a record playing, blasting, to drown out the noise in his head. He's trying not to think about what he's packing up and leaving behind. Trying not to think about Max, her face lit up by sparklers, laughing with her friends as the night drags on.

Trying not to think about Steve, with his big, sad eyes, watching Billy go.

He doesn't hear the front door open.

He doesn't know how he's supposed say goodbye to him. Doesn't know how he's supposed to keep that promise, to look at Steve and know it's the last time. Doesn't think he's strong enough to do it and still walk away.

Billy's got most of his clothes shoved in a ratty old suitcase. His weights are already in his trunk, with his books and some other shit he's stuffed in boxes over the last two weeks.

He's got his window open and he's smoking and he's shouting along with Eddie Van Halen-- and he doesn't hear the front door open.

"You trying to broadcast to the whole damn town?"

Neil's slurring when he tosses the record down. He's red in the face when he swaggers into the room. Without the music, everything is deafeningly quiet.

He's drunk and Billy didn't hear him come home.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Billy?” Neil's mouth twists up. “And where the hell is your sister?”

Billy’s blood runs cold.

He knows, already, that there’s very little he can say to delay the inevitable. And *nothing* he can say to prevent it entirely.

“At a sleepover,” Billy says. “Susan said --”

“I don’t give a *fuck* what *Susan says*,” Neil slurs.

Neil drags a hand over his face. He sways on his feet. He must be deep in the goddamn bottle.

“So you just -- left her at some stranger's house?” Neil asks. “So you could, what? Pack? You that desperate to get out? I put a goddamn roof over your head for years, and *still* you're an ungrateful piece of shit.”

Billy thinks about going to get Max. But she’s not at the Byers’, she’s at Hopper’s cabin with El, which Billy has only ever heard about in name. There’s no way he could pick her up, no way he could find her, even if his life depended on it.

“I’m sorry,” Billy says, sounding not even an ounce apologetic. He can’t muster it up from anywhere, and it doesn’t matter anyway.

“You're always sorry, Billy.” Neil shakes his head. “You're moving out. When the hell are you gonna shape up? How am I supposed to let you go out into the world on your own when you can't do the simplest things? How do you think that'll feel, on my conscience, if I let you leave and you fuck something up?”

It’s like a lead weight in his chest, the idea that Neil thinks he could *keep* Billy here. And, to some extent, he could. He could take Billy’s

keys, could find the money he has stashed away. He could break more than just Billy's face, if he wanted to.

Billy realizes he's never going to get that two hundred dollars Neil promised to him for carting Max around all summer. He probably never was.

His blood heats, his heart beating faster. The rage tastes like metal on his tongue.

"Once I'm gone," Billy says through clenched teeth, "you won't have to worry anymore, now will you?"

Billy knows better. He does.

He knows that sharp look in his eye. Knows better than to talk back when he looks like that.

But he's so mad. He's so mad that this man-- *this man*, his own father, the one Steve calls monster -- is the *reason* he has to run like this. Is the reason he has to leave Steve behind when all he wants is to *stay*.

And if Billy didn't hate him before, he does now.

Neil moves before Billy can brace himself. Catches Billy by the shirt and slams him back against the shelves he was just clearing.

"*Don't* use that tone with me."

Billy should back down. He should bare his neck like he *always does*. Should roll over and accept his fate.

But there's no way he's coming out of this with anything, at this point. No use in trying to placate or play the good son.

He's *not* the good son. Neil's made that one *perfectly clear*.

So, Billy squares his shoulders and bites through the pain in his back. "Actually," Billy says, blood boiling inside his veins, head pounding with the rush of it, "I don't see why you're not more happy I'm going. With me out of the picture, it leaves you alone with your picture perfect family, huh? It's what you *always wanted*."

The backhand is expected. The sting of it familiar.

“You're ungrateful. And you're disrespectful. After all I given you. After everything I've sacrificed for you -- and this is how you repay me.”

Neil takes him by the jaw. Squeezes. Makes Billy look at him.

“I don't think you're done learning how to be a man, Billy.” Neil says, and Billy’s blood prickles, like ice, through his veins. “Where are your car keys?”

There’s no way in hell Neil is getting his car keys. Billy needs out of this town, out of this *house*.

He needs out of this life, and Neil isn’t going to stop him.

Billy shoves, hard, before he can think any better of it, sending Neil stumbling backward. It’s the surprise and the alcohol combined working in Billy’s favor, leaving Neil looking shocked and outraged as he balances himself on Billy’s wall.

“You either give me your keys,” Neil says, jaw tight, but he doesn't come closer -- doesn't try to intimidate Billy back -- and Billy thinks it's because Neil's *scared.* “Or you leave this house, right now, and don't ever come back.”

Billy had never planned on coming back.

He could walk out of here right now, grab his bag and push straight past Neil, leaving it all unfinished and unwritten. Instead, Billy figures it all deserves a bit more poetry than that. It deserves a big, shiny bow.

“That’s the plan,” Billy says.

Neil never even sees Billy’s fist coming.

His head clatters back against the wall with a satisfying *crack*. Neil slumps down, drunk enough, *weak enough*, that one hit is all it takes. He cradles his nose, blood already pouring down his lip to his chin, groaning as his legs go out under him.

He blinks a few times, sways, and looks up at Billy -- and passes out.

Billy doesn't pretend to be a good person. He doesn't even think twice about reaching into Neil's pocket for his wallet, fishing out the money Neil *owed him*. Cleaning him out. It's not nearly what Neil promised, but it's something.

He grabs the rest of his stuff, shoves it all into a bag, and moves to Max's room.

He leaves her a note and one of the twenties, slipping both into her pillow case. He sets one of her stuffed animals, from her bookshelf, on top of her pillow. Just in case. So she knows he was there.

And then, Billy leaves, never sparing that goddamn house one last glance.

-*-

Steve isn't expecting to see him so soon after his promise. That's clear enough, by the wide eyes, by the way he goes still in his doorway, by the way he eyes Billy and then the Camaro behind him and his face breaks.

"You're leaving," he says. "Tonight."

Billy's lip is split. He nods.

He steps forward and makes Steve meet his eyes. "Come with me."

He doesn't know where it comes from. Where he dug up the courage to ask. But maybe facing down his dad tonight loosened him up a bit. Made him braver. Brave like Steve is brave.

Brave enough to come here and ask that.

Steve lets out a breath like it's been punched out of him. "Billy."

He knows what the answer is, but he asks again anyway, fingers wrapping around Steve's wrist. "Please, Steve. Please, come with me."

“I--” Steve's throat works; he reaches out and catches Billy's shirt front, fists it, and for the first time, Billy sees Steve *cry*. “I *can't.*”

He doesn't sob or shake with it. Doesn't heave and break.

But he cries. Standing there in front of Billy, he cries for the loss of him, and he's so damn pretty.

“I can't. I'm *sorry*. I can't.” Steve says, shaking his head, pulling at his shirt like he's afraid Billy will walk away. “I *want to* -- god, I wish I could, Billy --”

Billy’s eyes feel hot, too. Burning, with the desire to break down. And he *won’t*, he tells himself. He can’t.

“I know,” Billy says, because he does. But he couldn’t have lived with himself without asking, without at least trying. “I know,” he says, gathering Steve into his arms, right there on the front step.

Steve holds him tight. Presses his face to Billy's collar and breathes. Steve holds him like he doesn't ever want to let him go.

“Do you have to go right now?” Steve asks, and Billy feels his fingers curl into the cotton at his back.

He has to go soon, he knows. Eventually Neil will wake up. Eventually he’ll realize Billy’s gone and his wallet’s empty. He might even drive around town, looking for Billy’s Camaro. But Billy has some time, he thinks. He can give himself this.

“No,” Billy says, palm running flat over Steve’s spine. “Not right now.”

Steve pulls back, just enough to meet his eyes, shuffles back a step and brings Billy with him in his arms. “Come inside. Stay with me. At least until you have to go.”

Billy pushes the door closed behind him as he goes.

“I have to leave in the morning,” he says, because he’s not going to lie. Because he’s not going to let Steve think he’s running away more so than he already is.

“I know,” Steve breathes, eyes closing, forehead pressing to his. “But tonight-- we can have tonight.”

“Yeah,” Billy says, just savoring the moment like *tonight* can last forever if he wishes for it hard enough. “We can.”

He kisses Steve then, closing the distance between the two of them in something soft, something endlessly full of emotion.

Steve shudders and presses against him. His fingers are gentle against his jaw, his lips sweet against Billy's own.

When it breaks, Steve nudges at Billy's nose with his. “I'm gonna miss you. I'm gonna *miss you*.”

“I know, baby,” Billy says, fingers in Steve's hair, threading through that wild mess. He smells like like summer grass, like sparklers, and a little bit like weed, too. “I'm gonna miss you, too.”

Billy kisses him again because he can't stop, arms tight around Steve, tugging him close. Steve makes one of those soft, breathy sounds against his mouth. Angles his head and coaxes Billy into something deeper.

He walks them back. Guides Billy further into his house. Moans as Billy's tongue slides against his own.

Getting up the stairs is -- difficult. Because Billy refuses to stop kissing Steve, refuses to take even a single step away from him. Once they're at the top, Billy pushes Steve against one of the walls and whines into his mouth, body slotted so close to Steve it's like each breath is shared.

Steve drapes his arms over his shoulders and groans. Sinks his fingers into Billy's hair and gives a little tug, their kisses turned lazy, lippy, and desperate.

He hitches a heel at the back of Billy's knee, tugs him closer, and pulls away gasping. “*God, Billy*.”

“*Steve,”* Billy breathes out. “You're perfect.”

Warm hands find their way under Steve's shirt, sliding over soft skin. Working over toned muscle. Like he's trying to touch as much of Steve as possible. Like he's trying to memorize Steve's body.

Steve arches, letting out a breathy whine, trying to pull Billy impossibly closer. Muscle flexes under Billy's touch, and Steve trembles.

“I want you,” Steve says, kissing him between gasped words. “I always want you -- Jesus, Billy.”

“I want you too,” Billy says. “I've got you,” he also says, because Steve is shaking under his hands, like he's already going to fall apart.

Steve lets out a breath and sags against him, trailing kisses over Billy's cheek. “You can't leave, yet. You haven't taught me everything, yet. You're supposed to be my tour guide, remember?”

And Billy laughs, because that’s right, isn’t it? He’s supposed to be teaching Steve, supposed to be giving him some sense of direction. But he’s in way too deep for that. The idea that this could’ve been anything so detached is laughable, in a sad sort of way.

“I think I’m a little past that,” Billy says, thumbing over Steve’s cheek. “I’m way too stupid over you. But,” Billy presses a kiss to the corner of Steve’s lips, “what else did you want me to teach you?”

“I wanna feel you,” Steve says, hands sliding down, curving over his ass and tugging him forward sharply so that their hips meet. “I want everything, but we don't have time for everything tonight. So I'll take what you can give me. I'll take knowing what it feels like to have you in me.”

A breath escapes Billy at the contact, at Steve’s voiced desire.

“Fuck,” Billy says, rutting forward, pressing Steve against the wall. “Are you sure?”

Steve lifts a dry brow, rocks his hips, and hums when Billy bites back a groan. “Yeah. Pretty damn sure.”

“Then what the fuck are we still doing in your hallway?” Billy says.

With that, he picks up Steve, because he can and because it always makes Steve make a surprised and disgruntled noise, and carries him to his bedroom. Billy sets Steve down on the bed and crowds overtop of him again, pressing him down into soft sheets, showering him in kisses.

Steve closes his eyes to it, accepts it with breathy sighs and soft touches. Pulls at Billy's shirt and smoothes his hands up over warm skin. He turns his face to catch Billy's mouth, drawing out their kisses until they're just breathing each other.

Their clothes are stripped and on the floor before Billy can blink, because the draw of skin against skin is too much to bear, too much to ignore. So, naked and warm, Billy grinds down against Steve, pressing their bodies together, slotting them to one another.

“You’re something else,” Billy says, mouth on Steve’s jaw. “I’m so goddamn lucky.”

“Stop it,” Steve breathes, moving with him, rocking beneath him, catching one of his hands and lacing their fingers together. “Stop saying that. I'm not special.”

“Yeah,” Billy says, squeezing Steve’s hand, kissing his neck. “Yeah, you fucking are.”

“*Billy*,” Steve says, like he's begging, arching under him and making space between his thighs for Billy to settle, to rut with him, friction delightful and desperate as they both are.

As much as Billy wants to spend all night grinding against Steve, he also wants everything else, too.

So, Billy pulls back, kissing Steve’s jaw, his neck, his collar, his pecs. He moves down Steve’s body, trailing kisses over all of him until he hits Steve’s hip. Then, Billy bites a little bit until Steve squirms.

“Can I eat you out?” Billy asks.

Breathless, flush, Steve's head pops up from where it had lulled against the bed. “Can you *what*?”

Billy chuckles a little, because Steve's fucking adorable. Billy wants to kiss him, too, but he's all the way down here, so. He'll just have to kiss him elsewhere to make up for it, then.

"Don't tell me you never ate out your girlfriends," Billy says, shifting so he's nestled between Steve's spread legs. Hunkered down with a real pretty view.

Billy ignores Steve's dick completely, even though it's gorgeous and leaking and hard, and gets his palms on Steve's thighs, spreading them a little further.

"Might have to flip you, though," Billy says. "Logistically."

"*Oh*," Steve breathes, eyes going wide, face burning redder. "You-- Yeah, okay. Tour guide. Right."

Billy presses an open mouthed kiss to the inside of Steve's thigh, that sensitive skin under his tongue, his teeth.

"If you don't like it, we can stop. That goes for any of it, you know. I probably -- probably should've said that sooner, huh?"

Steve's face softens. He reaches down and cards his fingers through messy curls.

"You haven't done anything I haven't wanted you to," he says. "And I know you'd stop if I told you to."

Billy nods, leaning into that touch. Suddenly, despite the fact that they've been *doing this*, he's so scared of messing it up.

"I think you need to flip over for me, baby," Billy finally says.

Steve's throat works. "Okay."

He waits until Billy's pulled back. Waits until he's got enough room to turn over without braining Billy with an arant knee.

Then he's on his stomach, pillowing his head on his folded arms, spreading his legs a bit, and breathing steady.

Billy presses a kiss to the small of Steve's back. He's hot there, warmth pooling in the divots Billy finds with his lips. He spreads his palms over Steve's ass and just *touches* him. Getting him familiar with it. Getting him relaxed.

“I'm gonna be so good to you,” Billy says.

Steve shoots him a look over his shoulder. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Yeah, not exactly,” Billy says.

Then, he spreads Steve's cheeks apart with his hands and licks down the center of him, no preamble, no warning. Just slow and steady wet heat.

The gasp it earns, the way Steve jerks against the bed, hips bucking and hands flying out like he's trying to steady himself, go straight to Billy's gut. Makes his chest warm with delight, swell with a bit of pride, and a hum rumbles up from his ribcage.

He focuses his attention on Steve's hole, needy and hungry for it. He knows how overwhelming it can be, how *hot* it is. How it's so much and not enough, all at once.

Billy tightens his fingers a little and presses forward slightly, sliding the tip of his tongue inside Steve. Slick and giving, it goes easy.

Steve makes a sound like a whine, half choked and completely breathless. Muscles spasm and twitch and then go easy, even as Steve tenses under him, gasping hot and heavy against the sheets.

Billy wishes he could talk at Steve, too. Tell him how *good* he is, how goddamn pretty. But he can't, so he just slips one of his hands underneath him, to spread out on Steve's hip, to anchor him and pull him closer to Billy's mouth.

It's easy, pulling sinful noises out of Steve. Effortless practically, to make him squirm. And satisfying, too Billy thinks, as he pushes his tongue in more, relishing each noise as he gets it.

“*Holy shit*,” Steve pants against the sheets, clutches at them; Billy

wishes he could watch his face, see the expression he makes when he delves deeper, works him looser, wetter; Steve's voice pitches higher, breathier, and he arches, hips forced up and back for Billy's mouth. "Jesus -- *fuck*, Billy."

One of his feet kick against the sheets. His toes curl. He writhes. His breath catches on these perfect little moans.

Billy doesn't even bother trying to be polite about it. He just gets both hands under Steve and tugs. Pulling Steve till his hips are totally off the bed and his back is dipped and he's just *there* for Billy. And Billy? Goes to fucking town.

Steve shakes. Shakes and cries out, tugging at the sheets, pressing his face against them and sucking in breath after breath with his mouth open. Between his legs, his cock is drooling precome and red, heavy with his arousal -- with the pleasure *Billy's* giving him. And keeps giving him. *And keeps giving him.*

He starts begging as Billy holds him steady, as he keeps him from rutting down. Begs so pretty Billy wonders why he waited until now to do this to him.

"*Please, please, please*," again and again, Billy's name peppered in like he craves it on his tongue, hips jerking every once in a while, voice cracking. "I need you. *I need you.* Let me, please --"

It's fucking music, hearing Steve like that. But Billy can't let him come -- not yet. So, he slows down to a crawl and then pulls back. He presses a wet kiss to Steve's ass and pats him on the thigh.

"Pass me the lube?" Billy says.

He pops his thumb into his mouth and then brushes it over Steve's already slick hole. Steve jerks, shoving his face between his arms and groaning.

Doesn't move otherwise. Flush and panting, thighs shaking.

Steve is slick and already a little loose from Billy's tongue. So, Billy plays with him for a moment, just as is. Thumb, pressing in and stretching, but not quite *breaching.*

Then, Billy pulls back to lube up his fingers, two of them to start. He doesn't ask if Steve is ready because Steve is shaking and making those gorgeous little noises, so Billy just plays with him immediately, fingers moving to his hole to slick it up, just the same as his thumb but wetter, now, slicker.

Steve shifts a little, rocks on his knees, making soft sounds like his voice refuses to make words. He's covered in a sheen of sweat, still panting, moving under Billy's attention.

“You're perfect, baby,” Billy says. “Let me know how it feels, huh?”

Then, he slowly begins pushing his index finger inside, easy and careful. Steve's breath catches, but he doesn't tell him to stop.

He's tight and hot and slick as Billy works him open. And Billy can't imagine what it'll be like to be buried in him.

“Keep going,” Steve says, fingers curling and uncurling in the sheets.

It's easy, stretching Steve open and loose with all the little noises he makes.

When the stretch of one is gone, Billy works in his second finger, slowly, teasing the rim of him before working both fingers inside. Steve arches as he does, grunting and shivering, muscles winding tight until Billy smoothes a palm over his lower back.

“You're so good baby,” Billy says. “So perfect, look at you.”

It's the most beautiful sight, Steve opening up to Billy and taking him like this. *Trusting* Billy with this.

Steve groans, head lulling over and pressing his cheek to the cool relief of the sheets. His eyes flutter, face flush and warm, lovely as he rocks with the motion of Billy's fingers inside of him.

“Want you,” Steve says, voice a breathy mess. “Wanna feel you, so bad.”

And Billy wants nothing more than to press himself into Steve's heat -- but he can't, not yet.

“You're so tight, baby, not yet.”

Billy scissors his fingers slightly, doing his best to loosen Steve's muscles before dripping more lube over the center of him, third finger pressing in. Steve groans, low and long, hiding his face again.

The muscles in his thighs tremble. His toes curl into a point and he gasps out as Billy eases his fingers deeper.

“God. *God*, Billy.” He whines, twitches tight around him, and shudders.

It's practically magical, stretching Steve out like this. The way his body yields to Billy? It's better than any drug in the world.

Billy smooths a palm over Steve's flank as he presses in, slowly easing that third finger in alongside the other two, Steve hot and tight and slick around him.

“Tell me if it hurts. Promise me, huh?” He's never been so *concerned* before, so caring that he could cause someone pain.

“It doesn't,” Steve gasps, shaking his head, just shaking. “Doesn't hurt.”

Billy nods and lets his fingers slide in further, until they bottom out at the knuckle. Then, he twists and pulls his fingers out before sliding them back in again. Working up a rhythm that makes Steve moan.

Each breath Steve takes is twined and tangled with a keen, a whine, a moan. He rocks back to meet him, moves with him, accepts the curl of his fingers with little gasped cries.

He reaches for himself, grips around the base of his cock, and grunts. “Let me -- let me --”

Billy bats Steve's hand away. He knows how overpowering it all can feel. How *much* it is. But he doesn't want Steve coming. Not yet. He wants pleasure as the undercurrent to everything, never wants it to feel like too much when that veil is taken away.

Billy slows a little, still pressing down on that spot that makes Steve

groan, but he quits with the thrusting. “Not yet, baby. Want you to come with me inside you. It's so much better, I promise.”

Steve sobs out a sound, clutching at the sheets. “Then fuck me already.”

There's really no amount of prep that'll prepare Steve for it, Billy thinks. Not that he's huge but-- a dick is just never *quite* the same as fingers, no matter how many.

But he's ready, too. Hard and leaking and *aching* for Steve.

“Okay,” he says.

So, Billy slowly works his fingers out of Steve and gets them on his own cock, slicking that up too with more lube.

Then, Billy shuffles closer on his knees, lines himself up, breath shuddering out of him when he does, and presses in. And Steve's body gives to him. Opens up beautifully and then clenches tight, Steve's breath coming in short, sharp little hitches.

He presses his forehead to the bed, back bowing, and groans. “*Jesus*.”

“Breathe, baby,” Billy tells him, running a hand over Steve's side.

He pauses, giving Steve a chance to get used to it before rocking his hips slightly forward, stealing more space, pushing into Steve just a bit more.

“You're doing so good,” Billy says, voice rough. Wrecked. “You feel so good.”

Steve's hand catches Billy's at his hip. Clutching and twining their fingers together as he forces himself to breathe. To steady as Billy eases in.

Still, his body opens to him. He's tight and he's hot and he's wet, muscles clenching and relaxing as he finds a rhythm to breathe. As he sinks into the sensation.

“Talk to me, baby,” Billy says, because he wants to know, wants to

hear Steve.

He wants to see him, too, which is hard, like this. Objectively, it's the easiest position because Billy's got eyes on him, can make sure he's doing alright, but it's not quite the same as being face to face.

“You want it like this, or -- we could move -- or?”

Billy, babbling, because he wants it to be perfect and he wants it all at once.

“I wanna -- I need to see you,” Steve says, voice high, fingers curling tighter. “I need to see you.”

Slowly, Billy pulls back out and gets a hand on himself, slick fingers rolling over the heat of his length. His other hand wraps around Steve's hip, just settling there, steadying.

“How do you want me?” Billy asks. “I'm sorry I didn't ask before.”

“Don't care,” Steve says, already twisting over, reaching for him. “Just let me see you. Let me touch you.”

Billy crowds down around Steve, pinning him against the blankets, kissing him everywhere.

“This is gonna be a little harder, baby,” Billy says, kissing Steve's jaw, then his lips.

Steve curves a hand against his cheek, kissing him slow and soft. “You won't hurt me.”

Something heats inside Billy at the idea that Steve trusts him. Even though Billy is *leaving,* even though he’ll be gone in the morning, Steve still trusts him. It's amazing.

Billy wrestles a pillow underneath Steve's hips and gets his hands on Steve's skin, smoothing over him, opening those legs so that they can wrap around Billy's waist. Billy steadies himself with his fist around the base of his cock, lines himself up, and presses back into Steve's warmth with a groan.

Beneath him, Steve's breath stalls. His hands go to Billy’s shoulders, curving over them, fingers digging into corded muscle. Steve moans, and it's so much better getting to see his face. The way his lashes flutter, the way his head strains back in a subtle arch, the way his mouth falls open as Billy eases in.

His legs hitch up higher at Billy's waist, thighs clenching around him. It's so good, being flush with him, skin on skin, panting the same breath. Billy presses in more, to that sinful heat, and Steve grunts, muscles in his thighs trembling.

“You're so --” Steve's throat works; his nails dig in at Billy's shoulders. “Fuck, you're so big like this.”

Maybe it's having someone push down on you, maybe it's the intimacy of being face to face and on your back -- but Billy's always felt that way too. It's *better* like this -- but also a little harder, too.

But it means he can kiss Steve, can catch him in something deep and affectionate after those words leave his mouth, as Billy bottoms out inside him, easy and slow. Steve gasps against his mouth, strains and then relaxes. Takes him perfectly, heat fluttering around Billy.

They lay there like that for a second, stealing kisses between breaths, touching and settling into the sensation together.

Then, Billy rocks. Presses that much deeper. Steve moans, one of his hands snaking between them, pressing to the flat of his belly, just below his navel, like he can feel Billy there. Billy rocks again, because it's overwhelmingly good, and Steve's eyes roll back.

“*Fuck*,” Steve arches, legs drawing tight, and his hands come up to take Billy's face between his palms. “C'mon. I'm okay. Make love to me.”

Billy smiles, forehead tipping to touch Steve's.

“You're --” Billy huffs out a laugh and kisses him, light, hips starting to move a bit more, pace quickening up. “You're perfect,” Billy says.

Because he's the only person Billy could say he hasn't just *fucked*. Because Billy cares about him. Because Billy *loves* him.

And it makes it all that much better.

They move slow, at first. Just rocking, really, Billy patient in letting Steve get a feel for it. Kisses drag as Billy slides in deep and pulls out steady. Steve catches one of his hands and tangles their fingers together. Gasps and moves with him.

“More,” he says.

Billy is happy to oblige.

His hips snap a little faster and his thrusts drive a little deeper, filling Steve with each go, body rocking against him, skin on skin. Billy stretches their laced fingers over Steve's head and kisses him, long and slow.

It's *amazing* -- there's nothing quite like this feeling. Steve is so *close*, the two of them rolling into one with each thrust, each ripple of shared pleasure.

Steve squeezes at his fingers. Clutches at his hands. He arches, trying to meet the motion of Billy's hips, each inward thrust knocking a moan right out of his mouth.

He's a beautiful mess, laid out under Billy like this, hair everywhere and skin glistening. He meets him with open mouthed kisses when Billy’s lips seek his own. There's a hazy look in his eyes, one Billy recognizes as bliss.

It's gratifying, knowing he can give Steve this. Before he goes, he can leave Steve with this memory, this love.

“Never gonna forget you,” Billy says, kissing Steve again, then leaning down to bury his face in Steve's neck like he's lost in it, in the emotion of it all.

Billy works a hand in between them, wrapping fingers around Steve's cock. Wanting Steve to feel it all, not miss out on an ounce of it.

Steve cries out. Bucks into his touch. Says his name over and over and over.

“I love you,” Steve gasps. “I-- Billy, I--”

He breaks apart. Shatters to pieces under Billy's touch. Spilling out and shuddering.

Billy isn't long behind him. His orgasm hit like a wave, cresting with Steve's words, with the full meaning behind them.

“I love you,” Billy says, gasping, pressing his lips to Steve's neck, over and over again, still hazy and soft with pleasure. “I love you. I love you.”

Steve trembles against him, huffing and slumping under him as they both settle, head lulling over. “I don't want to watch you leave.”

“I know,” Billy says.

He doesn't say *I don't want to go*, because it would be a lie.

“Come with me?” he says again, even though he knows the answer.

Steve falters, like he's half a second from saying *yes*. “Please, don't ask me again. I don't think I can say no to you again.”

“Sorry,” Billy says. For asking. For leaving at all. But he knows that he has to. And Steve knows that, too. “I'm going to miss you,” he says.

Steve wraps his arms around him. Tangles his fingers into Billy's hair and holds on.

“We have all night,” Steve says. “No need to miss me, yet.”

Billy doesn't want to fall asleep. But he knows he has to. He can already feel the tug of sleep behind his eyes.

He tucks his arms around Steve, pulling him close. He turns them a little, slowly pulling out of Steve in the process. On their sides, Billy feels even closer to Steve, arms wrapped around him and keeping him flush.

He still feels like he's going to break, though. Like leaving is going to

pull him apart at the seams. Like he's already started unraveling.

Steve tucks impossibly closer. He hooks an ankle behind one of Billy's and breathes deep as he presses their foreheads together.

“You can always--” Steve cuts himself off, curls his arms tight around him. “My door is always open. For you, it's always open.”

“Thank you,” Billy says.

He knows he'll always be welcome here. But there's something about *hearing* it. It warms him, spreading through his chest like wildfire, like hope. Like maybe, one day, he can come back here.

Like he deserves to have this again.

“Thank you,” Billy says, nosing at Steve's neck. “Thank you for everything.”

Steve presses his lips to Billy’s head, kisses his curls, and holds him. “Anytime.”

“I don't want to leave you,” Billy says. “But god, I have to. I can't stay here, Steve. As much as I want to stay with you. I just -- need you to know that. I need you to know that I care about this. About you.”

His fingers card through Steve's hair. Gentle. Affectionate.

“I know you can't stay, Billy.” Steve says. “Even if you want to, you -- it's -- you'll be safer. Away. And I could never begrudge you that. Even if I'll miss you.”

“I'll always miss you, Steve Harrington,” Billy says, pressing a kiss to his temple. “I'll never forget this summer. Nothing'll ever compare.”

Steve looks at him, face warm and fond and immeasurably sad. “Who the hell is gonna keep me from burning, now?”

“You'll just have to be careful. Gotta promise to take care of yourself.”

Because even if Billy is spinning in California, he'll know that Steve is

okay. That he's *good*.

“I will,” Steve says, fingertips ghosting over his cheek. “You, too.”

“Yeah,” Billy says. “For you, anything.”

Though he may have to give up cherries for a while.

-*-

Steve's front door clicks closed behind him in the morning, dawn just creeping above the treeline.

"Leave before I wake up, so I don't have to watch you go. So I don't try and follow."

It's killing Billy to give Steve this; it's tearing him up inside. He's never once felt this rotten, this much like he's decaying straight in the gut. He feels hot, and then cold, and then very much like his heart is pumping glass through his veins.

But hell -- Billy would do anything Steve asked of him, including *stay*.

It's a good thing Steve never asked.

The wood of the door is cold when his forehead hits it. Billy blinks away tears as he pushes himself back and starts in toward his car, fishing the keys out of his pocket.

This has got to be the right thing, right? Billy can't *stay*.

He *can't*.

He's known that since he moved here. He'll destroy himself in this place. He'll fizzle out, blink out like a dying star.

But he can come back, Billy tells himself. He can one day see Steve again.

The Camaro purrs to life so easily underneath his hands. So beautifully.

He pulls out of the drive slowly, and then out of Steve's

neighborhood. Still blinking past the burning in his eyes.

Hawkins disappears so quickly in his rearview -- Billy blinks, and it's gone.

-*-

Billy wishes he could have kissed Steve one last time.

2. Part Two

Notes for the Chapter:

> Thank you all for sticking this out. Hopefully, it was worth the wait.
>
> WARNINGS: angst, fluff, nostalgia, dumb men being dumb men, communication issues, and love. So much love.
>
> (Also, like, really great sex. Like, super awesome sex.)

California is exactly as Billy remembers it.

Sunny and beautiful, full of beautiful people, salt in the air, rich food and rich culture.

But it isn't perfect. Couldn't ever be. Not anymore, with a Steve shaped hole in his chest, longing like a bad taste in his mouth.

He makes himself a home, though. Finds a job, finds a place, stops living out of the trunk of his car.

He finds himself imagining Steve wherever he goes. In his shitty bed -- a mattress on the floor, by the window overlooking the pier, sun on his skin in the mornings-- and in his shitty kitchen, laughter in his eyes, coffee and maybe weed on his breath. He imagines him in the sand, in the sea, what he would look like spread out on the California coast.

-*-

He does this for a long time. Imagines what Steve would say, what he would look like in the night lights.

He does this until he doesn't anymore. Or, at least, not as often.

Until years go by.

Too many.

Until, on a night when he's drunk and he's high, he tells the man he's just fucked about Steve without any of the heartbreak.

“First loves, you know?”

Until, one day, he gets a letter from Max, one of many from over the years, and with it comes an invitation.

And with it, comes a smile.

-*-

Five years later and Hawkins looks different.

It's brighter, cheerier, more open. Less claustrophobic, less washed out.

Or maybe Billy's just grown up a bit.

He rolls into town just as the sun sets, past familiar diners and old haunts. Past the swimming pool, closed for the night.

It hits him like a pang, aching and raw. Memories of that summer. Regrets.

Why hadn't Billy ever called, afterwards? Why hadn't he ever written?

He knows the answer, just as well as he knows why he left. Because he couldn't. Because he didn't deserve Steve. Because he knows that it was just a summer thing. Just a fling, just a memory.

He never wanted to hear that rejection.

He wanted Steve to be *happy* . To have no regrets.

Maybe he should have anyway. But he didn't. And there's little he can do about it now.

The motel is fine. It's got a bed and a television and a little fridge, which is all he needs for the week or so he'll be sticking around.

He's not even sure if he should be here, thrust into his past like this. It makes him feel strange, like something he's outgrown. Like he’s moved on past who he was when he was here.

But it's important to Max. She'd sent him the invite, and he'd called her a day later. They don't talk too often, about every couple months or so, but Billy tries to. Knows it's important.

He *wants* it to be important, too.

Jesus, he can't believe she's already graduating. She had been *so excited* he was coming to the celebration. To the party, afterwards.

He feels like he was just watching her swim at the quarry yesterday, just carting her around like a chauffeur.

Sleep doesn't come easy in an unfamiliar bed in a too familiar town, but eventually it does.

-*-

The ceremony is as uneventful as his own. He watches from the audience, from a spot right next to Susan, reserved just for him if he decided to come, and she smiles at him in that soft, tentative way she used to -- but with loose shoulders from three years spent free of Billy's father, long gone and skipped town after Susan kicked him out.

Max is *tall* . Much taller than he would've thought her to be -- the pictures she sent never did her justice. She *towers* over all but maybe two of her friends when they huddle together after receiving their diplomas -- one Billy recognizes as undoubtedly Lucas Sinclair, still one of the only black faces in a small town like this, and the other who Billy thinks might be Mike Wheeler.

Nancy must've lost all her height to him in the gene pool.

Billy’s about to get up, to go congratulate her in person, when a curly head, ball hat and all contrasting with everyone's graduation caps, that hasn't changed all that much -- other than filling out in the shoulders-- waves and shouts to someone seated behind Billy.

“Steve! Get your ass over here!”

He knows him the second he sees him. The same hair, the same frame -- though maybe a little more meat on his bones -- in pressed khakis and a blue dress shirt he's rolled the sleeves of. He greets Dustin with a smile, a laugh, a mess of his curly hair, and the rest of the kids -- jesus, not anymore, not really -- bounce around him and show off their fake, rolled up diplomas.

Just as damn pretty as the last time Billy had seen him, asleep and alone in his bed.

Max has an arm slung around the shoulders of a small girl Billy thinks might be El. She looks at him, through him, the same way she had so many years ago.

She tugs on Max's graduation gown and says something, and then Max is looking, seeking, and beaming.

"Billy!"

Her shout rings out over the crowds of people. Billy feels -- frozen and elated and terrified and proud, all at once.

He can't help but be nervous about seeing Steve, about his heart kicking up at the sight of him. But this moment is about *Max* , and so Billy pushes everything to the side, and plows himself through the crowd to her side.

Before he can figure out if it's *okay* to hug her, she throws her arms around his shoulders.

"You *came* ," she says, face in his neck. "You cut your *hair* ," she says, almost a second later, pulling back to gape at him.

"Yeah," Billy says, running a hand through the longer curls up top. "I guess I never mentioned it."

Max scrunches up her nose, flicking at his ear. "It's weird. Good. But weird."

"Holy *shit* ," Dustin says, and he's staring wide eyed at Billy, elbowing the short kid next to him-- he looks too much like Jonathan, like Joyce, to be anybody but Will Byers.

“Shut *up* , Dust-head.” Max shoots over her shoulder, and then smiles at Billy again, rocking up onto her toes and shoving a rolled up piece of paper at him. “Look. It’s fake, but still.”

Billy takes the paper, admires it for a second, and then hugs her again. Because he can. Because apparently he's *that person* now. And maybe because it's been a while since he's hugged anyone, too.

“I'm proud of you,” he says against her hair. “Even if you have shitty taste in friends, still.”

But it's fond. Because he's glad she has them, even if they are *weird as hell* .

“ *Hey!”* Dustin shouts, but he stops, presumably elbowed by someone with more self preservation. Not that Billy's that guy anymore -- but he used to be.

When he looks, because he can’t help but look, he realizes that it’s Steve who’s smacked Dustin upside the head. Steve, who’s looking at him with those big brown eyes that have followed Billy everywhere he’s gone since he’s left, and has his hands on his hips like he’s about to scold Dustin when he spits out a curse and palms the back of his head.

Steve, who looks away when he sees Billy looking, flush on his face like it’s the middle of summer and not the end of May.

“You’re coming to the party, right?” Max asks as she pulls away.

He's got no idea what he's supposed to do with Steve Harrington anymore. No idea how he's even supposed to say *hello* .

“Yeah,” Billy breathes out. “I am.”

“Awesome,” Max says.

“What?” Dustin scoffs. “Not awesome. It’s bad enough the parental units and Mr. Killjoy over here is gonna be there--”

Dustin ducks another smack to the head, laughing as he hides behind the slighter Will.

“-- the plan was to get trashed!” Dustin says. “How are we supposed to get trashed with all these *adults* around?”

“Henderson, I’m begging you, *don’t* mention that in front of my dad.” El says.

“Look, kid,” Billy says, like he doesn't know Dustin's name. “I don't give a *shit* if you get trashed. You making a fool of yourself is not my problem.”

He simultaneously wants to go to the party, just to ruin it for Dustin, and also to skip it, because he knows he's not welcome other than for Max inviting him.

Dustin perks, grinning, and he shoots a look that Billy doesn’t miss over at Steve. “Still an asshole.”

Steve rolls his eyes, and Billy thinks he might be missing something. Especially when, all of a sudden, the kids start making excuses.

“Oh, I think I see my parents.” Lucas says. “Catch you guys at the party.”

“And I see my mom,” Dustin bounds over to Steve, plants a sloppy kiss to his cheek, and laughs as Steve shoves him away. “Don’t forget your swimsuits!”

El tugs at Max’s gown again. “Walk me over to my dad?”

“Of course,” Max says, turning a stern look over at Billy. “Be there. Got it?”

She doesn’t wait for a reply. Lets El drag her off like she’s not twice the girl’s size.

Joyce Byers is the only parent Billy *actually* sees. Will passes a small smile to Billy, hugs Steve as he goes, and then trots off until only Mike is left between them.

The kid, overgrown and lanky as he is, still has the gaul to be annoyed with everything. “I’m not sticking around for this awkward reunion. Good luck, Steve.”

He pats Steve's shoulder as he goes, ignores the way Steve's ears go red, and leaves them standing there in the middle of the celebration.

It's like Billy's suddenly underwater. All the noise around the muffled and distorted in his ears. Like he can't breathe.

"So," Billy says, feet glued to the grass underneath him, heart doing it's damndest to pound straight out of his chest. "Hey."

Steve's brows shoot up, mouth twitching, like he might be trying not to smile. "Hey? Five years and all I get is a *hey* ?"

And sure, Steve *might* be smiling, but Billy *does* feel bad about it. Seeing Steve, right here, Billy feels like that lovesick teen again.

He wishes he had called Steve every night. He wishes he had never left.

Billy shifts on his feet. He feels a little unstable. A little dizzy. And jesus, he's still *so gone* for Steve Harrington.

"Sorry," he says, because he means it. Because he wants to hug Steve, too, and doesn't know how. Or even if he's allowed.

Steve's face softens. "It's nice to see you, Billy."

"You too," he says, because he doesn't know how to *do* this. "You look -- good."

Steve glances down at himself, shrugs, and shoves his hands into his pockets. "I guess library chic suits me."

He looks back up, eyes straying over Billy's best jeans and the clean lines of his shirt. He barks out a bit of a laugh, tries to cover it, and fails when he meets Billy's gaze again, grinning.

"You look good, too." Steve says. "Even if it's a little weird to see you all buttoned up."

"It happens occasionally," Billy says, a smile easing onto his face. "Twice a year, maybe. Max is lucky I like her."

He feels shabby, in comparison to Harrington. Not that Billy's let himself *go* , but he's not nearly as cut as he was five years ago. Life gets in the way. But he stays fit and dresses decently. But Steve -- Steve looks just like Billy pictured him. All grown into his skin and filling out his clothes perfectly.

“Yeah, she is.” Steve says, face soft and fond, but then he blinks and it's gone. “I know she invited you to the party, but do you know where it's at?”

Billy pulls out a wrinkled piece of paper from his pocket. “I've got an address,” he says. “It's a small town. There can't be *that* many streets. I'm sure I can find it.”

Steve makes a face, then clears his throat and bobs his head. “I'm sure you can. You've found it a few times before.”

Billy looks down at the paper, then looks back up at Steve. He swallows his heart out of his throat. “This isn't -- it's not *your* house, is it?”

It couldn't be.

It totally *could.* Billy looks down at the address again, looks at the vaguely familiar street name. He'd only ever really gotten there by memory, before.

Steve sighs, but his smile is fond. “Yeah, well, I'm the only one with a pool. And since my mom moved back to Italy, it's kind of become their hangout.”

Billy has so many questions. So many answers he wants. But Steve isn't his -- never really was.

“I think I can manage to find it again,” Billy says, like he couldn't make the way there in his sleep.

“Good,” Steve says, nodding, and he shuffles on his feet. “I gotta get going, then. Make sure everything's set up right. But I'll see you there?”

“Course. Wouldn't miss it,” Billy says. “I've gotta piss Dustin off, at

least.”

Steve laughs, eyes wrinkling at the corners, and he nods his head again. “He'll be elated.”

He hovers there, for a second, like he's debating something while smiling at Billy. Like he's just as unsure.

But then he steps forward, always just that much braver than Billy, and he wraps his arms around him in a loose embrace.

“It really is good to see you, Billy.” Steve says. “There's a key -- if you wanna show up early and catch up. There's still a key under the magnolia.”

The *for you* goes unsaid. Or maybe it's just wishful thinking, that Steve left that key there for him all these years. That he kept that promise, all these years, of an open door.

But then Steve's moving, starting to pull away. Backing off before Billy can even right himself.

“I'll see you at the party.”

-*-

Billy means to find the key under the magnolia an hour before the party. Even half an hour. But after he's put on every single shirt he packed, *twice* , he just freezes. He sits down on the edge of his motel bed to catch his breath and just -- doesn't get up.

Time slides by him in a haze of anxiety, oozing past him like syrup.

“Get your shit together,” he finally tells himself, scrubbing his hands over his face after his heartbeat finally, *finally* starts to slow.

Once he's going, once he's actually pulled himself together, he makes it out of his motel room and to Steve's in the blink of an eye. Like he never forgot an inch of the road between them.

The party’s in full swing by the time Billy shows up.

Which is -- well, he used to be that guy.

At least he's the kind of guy who rings the doorbell, now, he thinks, leaning on the molding next to the door while his stomach aches in apprehension.

When the door swings open, though, it isn't Steve that answers. It's Mike Wheeler, with a twenty clutched in his hand, and he frowns when he sees Billy-- not because it's Billy, apparently, but because Billy is not the pizza guy.

“False alarm, Steve!” He hollers over his shoulder. “It's just your ex-boyfriend!”

Inside, there's a crash of a sound. Someone is laughing, deep from their belly; it sounds a bit like the Chief of Police.

Someone, maybe Lucas, shouts back: “Which one?”

Then Steve is there, flush and shoving Mike as he cackles, back into the house, wet swim trunks and all.

When he's gone, when it's just Steve and Billy standing there in the threshold, Steve slumps. “I am *so* sorry.”

Billy is red. He can feel it creeping over his face. He wants to say *it's fine* , wants to forget the aching in his gut. Instead, his traitorous mouth repeats: “ *Which one?”*

Steve blinks, then colors even more. “Um. That's uh-- I mean, there was-- the thing is --”

Steve cuts himself off. Sighs. Closes his eyes and takes a breath.

When he meets Billy’s gaze again, he steps back and makes room for him to step inside. “Long story. Not all that interesting. Lucas is a dick. Please, come in.”

Billy doesn't know what that means. He honestly never considered Steve having any boyfriends. Despite all of it. Just girlfriends. Settling down, being happy, hell -- even having kids.

“They're *all* dicks,” Billy says.

And then he lets Steve usher him inside the house. It's *crazy,* being back inside the Harrington house. Like being in a dream. Billy goes quiet and hovers near the door, unsure where his usual bravado went. Probably crushed underneath the weight of longing in his chest.

The house is the same and not all at once. Same walls, same floors, same shape -- but there's things missing, different, changed. A bit like Steve, in that respect.

It looks like Steve's, though, even from what he can see in the foyer. Not like a tomb left for an absent family. It looks lived in, loved, and warm.

The thing Billy notices most, however, is that not every light is on. And there's the distinct sound of water splashing, of laughter, coming from around the corner and outside at the pool.

“Lucas just thinks that everyone I'm seen with for longer than five seconds, outside of them, is suddenly my significant other.” Steve says, fidgeting as he passes by, as he heads for the kitchen expecting Billy to follow. “I think he's still pissed that he was the only one who didn't notice we were -- well.”

Billy follows because he wants to. Because he also has nowhere else to go.

“I guess we weren't -- exactly subtle.” Billy says, finally. Leaning against the island, miles of counter between him and Steve.

Steve barks out a laugh and pulls open the fridge -- tossing Billy a beer and cracking one open for himself. “Yeah, no. About as subtle as hormonal teenagers can be. But it actually kind of helped -- Will came out to us, about two years ago, and said it was because he saw us kissing as the quarry. Hadn't realized it was an option before that, I guess.”

The beer is good, when Billy opens it and takes a long sip. Better than the shit they drank in high school.

Billy’s face feels warm and the cold beer only half helps.

The fear he would've felt, five years ago, at being caught washes over him, unbidden. But it fades like a gust of wind, leaving him just a little ruffled, a little reminded of his past. He's been out for a while, now: uncaring, free. He's not going to let small town Indiana make him feel that scared again.

“That's something,” Billy says. “Not really *surprising* .” He takes another sip. “It's good he had you.”

It sucked, feeling so alone in Hawkins, even though Billy wasn't, at the very end.

“Yeah,” Steve says, leaning a palm against the counter, all casual lines -- and Billy is struck, not for the first time, by just how good Steve looks.

It's the way he holds himself. The way he doesn't look a second from fear, anymore. The line of his shoulders, easy and welcoming. The way he looks at Billy, like even if he's embarrassed, even if this is uncomfortable, there's something warm there.

Twenty-four looks good on him, either way. Even now, changed into ratty jeans and a band tee he must've gotten from Jonathan -- if they’re even still friends-- his shoulders look a bit broader, his cheeks missing their baby weight.

Billy, somehow, stupidly, thought he couldn't get any prettier.

“So, tell me about California.” Steve says.

It takes Billy a second to tear his eyes off of Steve, but he does. He looks back at his drink, at the kitchen around him. He listens to the kids shouting from the other room. And he smiles, because maybe this won't be so hard. Maybe he always knew he was this far gone for Steve, that he'd always have this much trouble seeing him again.

But talking about California is easy. Talking about himself and the life he's built, the happiness he's found -- it's easy.

And the way Steve smiles is even easier, too.

At some point, between Billy waxing poetic about the beaches, the music, the food, and Steve peppering in questions, Billy gets comfortable. It's a lot like catching up with an old friend, even if Billy's never really done that before, and the raw, open interest, the acceptance, for whatever he's saying, keeps him talking. Even as El comes bounding in, wrapped up in a towel.

Steve smacks a kiss to the top of her head as she goes by giggling, a couple cans of soda clutched in her arms from the fridge. It's so damn sweet, so damn affectionate, Billy loses track for a second.

"Don't drop those!"

"As if that's possible," El says, then scampers off outside.

Steve looks at Billy again. "The pier sounds fun."

But Billy isn't thinking about the pier anymore.

He *misses* Steve. In an aching and raw sort of way, like a sunburn -- all over and indirect. He wants to push into Steve's space, to pepper his skin with kisses.

Suddenly, those cherry kisses seem like just yesterday. So recent that Billy can taste them on his tongue.

"Yeah," he manages, voice rough with want. "It's good."

He has literally no idea what they were even talking about, before.

"It sounds good," Steve says, smiling at him, sipping his beer. "All of it sounds good. I'm really -- California looks really good on you, Billy."

Billy can't help but grin, feeling a little boyish, a little proud.

"So, how are you?" he asks, because he wants to know, because he wants to ask about all of it, even though he feels like it's no longer his place. "Still babysitting, I see."

"Only when they really, really need it." Steve says. "Which is most of the time. And when I'm not, I'm at the library. And that's kind of like

babysitting, too.”

“You're a librarian?”

Jesus. He's like a *hot dad* and Billy has no idea what to do with that.

“Do you wear glasses now, too?”

Like he's actually trying to *kill* Billy.

“Only when I'm reading,” Steve says. “And it's more a part-time gig, anyway. I go when they really need me -- or when I'm really bored.”

Jesus , Billy thinks. Steve laughs, and he realizes he might have said that out loud. So, he downs the rest of his beer and rounds the fridge for a new one.

“You look good too,” Billy says, leaning a hip against the counter as he opens his beer. “But I'm sure the Hawkins moms tell you that all the time. I remember them being *rabid* .”

Not that Billy didn't invite it, but.

“A few of them have made passes,” Steve shrugs, but he's still grinning, even as his nose wrinkles up. “Worse are the high schoolers.”

Billy can only imagine what he would've done to get his hands on Steve back then. Then again, glasses and being a *librarian* weren't really his thing. Not like they are now -- apparently. But maybe that's just *Steve* .

Billy's always been weak for him.

“Tough life, huh?” Billy says. He wants to ask if Steve's seeing anyone now, if he's got someone special -- but he also desperately doesn't want to know.

“Oh my god,” Max says, striding into the kitchen. “Can you stop flirting and, like, *do something* ? There's a whole table full of food that needs to be grilled, you guys. Don't make us cook at our own party.”

“And Hopper isn't already on it?” Steve asks, not moving an inch, not the way he might've five years ago-- falling all over himself to make sure they got what they needed, complaining all the while.

Instead, he stands there staring Max down. He even knocks back a big swallow from his beer.

“That's a damn shame, Maxine. All of those burger patties are gonna go to waste.”

Max throws her towel at Steve's face. “You're such a prick.”

“A prick who lets you use his pool and trash his place,” Steve says.

Max rolls her eyes. “Whatever. Just -- don't let me find you making out with my brother, okay?”

“Good *bye* , Max.” Steve says, tossing her towel back to her; she catches it without looking. “Teenagers,” Steve huffs.

“I am literally standing *right here* ,” she says. And *then* she turns to leave the kitchen.

But she's clearly so fond of Steve it hurts. Billy -- can't help but be a bit jealous. Of both of them, really, all at once.

“We could,” Billy says after a little while, when the kitchen is all theirs again. “I wouldn't mind.”

“We should,” Steve admits, making a face. “But they can't get their way all the time. Give it five minutes, then we'll go out there.”

“When did you grow a spine, King Steve?” Billy asks, but his tone is kind.

Steve shrugs. Billy guesses it was probably around the same time that he started using his pool again.

Billy fishes around in his pocket and pulls out a blunt.

“Do you, still, or are you too good a librarian?” Billy asks.

Steve snorts. “I'm a trustfund baby. If I didn't at least smoke weed from time to time, I'd get my inheritance taken away.”

“Jesus,” Billy says. “Of course you are.” Somehow, it makes Steve even more endearing even though it shouldn't. “Where to, if you wanna?”

Honestly Billy's nerves are a little frayed and he doesn't smoke cigarettes anymore, so he could use a little relaxer to go along with the beer. Not that smoking with Steve is the most relaxing thing, but. It's a little indulgent, too.

Steve hums, then pushes off the counter. He gestures for Billy to follow, and leads him upstairs.

For a horrifying, spectacular moment, Billy thinks Steve is leading him to his bedroom.

In another life, he would've been right. He opens the door to what used to be his bedroom, the windows open over the backyard, but it is no longer Steve's room. The walls are blue, not that horrible plaid, and instead of a bed, there's a chair and a desk and a comfortable looking chaise. There's records on one side of the room, books on the other.

“I converted it after my dad died and my mom moved out. Left me the house. I had the kids over a *lot* after that.” Steve says, when Billy stalls in the door. “They liked playing D&D in my dad's old den, so I left them to it and turned my room into an office. Moved myself into the master. Redid everything.”

Billy closes the door behind him, feeling a little weightless in this space so full of memories. It was a lifetime ago. It was yesterday.

“I'm sorry,” Billy says. “About your dad.”

He has no idea if they were close. He just knows that Steve's parents were never around. He -- doesn't know a lot about Steve, really.

His regrets about the past five years? Yeah, they're really starting to stack up.

“The first year was a little rough,” Steve admits, padding over to the desk and pulling out a lighter Billy had seen him with half a dozen times in high school; he tosses it to Billy and shrugs. “I kept expecting him to show up and read me the riot act for selling my half of the family business to someone way more qualified than me. *No son of mine is a quitter.* You know. Bullshit like that. But I had a pretty great support network here, so.”

“I'm glad,” Billy says, lighting up the joint with a long pull, smoke filling his lungs. “You seem happy.”

Steve watches him.

“Haven't talked to my dad in three years,” Billy supplies, so it's a little even. But also, because he wants to share.

“You look better for it,” Steve says. “You're dad was an asshole.”

“He was,” Billy says. “I'm glad Max doesn't have to deal with him, either. Thanks for uh, putting up with some of the aftermath of -- all that.”

He passes the joint over and then sits down on the chaise. Steve takes it, leaning back against the edge of the desk, arms half crossed.

“That's what I'm here for,” Steve says. “To take care of things.”

He drags long and slow, closes his eyes as he holds it and breathes out. His whole body goes easy. His head tips back and he huffs out a laugh before taking another pull.

He passes it back to Billy, eyes warm when he meets Billy’s stare.

Outside the open windows, they can hear the kids laughing. They can smell the food cooking.

“So you've told me about your job, about your place, about California -- but you haven't told me too much about you. Not really.” Steve says. “So, tell me. Are you happy out there on the golden coast?”

Billy actually thinks about the answer before he gives it, not wanting to lie. Steve deserves more than that.

“It's good,” Billy says, taking a drag and passing it back. “I mean, it's -- taken a while to make myself a life there. But I have. And it's good. *I'm* good.” He pauses, then lets himself lean back a bit, eyes up at the ceiling. “I'm pretty happy. Sometimes lonely, but pretty damn happy.”

There’s a pause. Billy hears Steve hiss out a breath as he exhales.

“I'm glad,” Steve says, so soft, so earnest. “I'm really happy to hear that, Billy. That you're happy.”

“Are you?” Billy asks. He shifts on the chaise until he's leaning up against its back, legs stretched out long. “Happy, I mean.”

Steve hesitates. “Yeah. I mean, as happy as I can be. I have good days and bad days. Just like anyone else, I imagine.”

Billy nods. Quiet falls as they pass the joint back and forth for a little while, fingertips brushing.

Eventually, Billy lets Steve kill it.

“Sorry,” he says. “I should've called. Or written. I just --”

All his reasons are just as flimsy as they are too numerous to count.

“You don't need to apologize, Billy.” Steve says. “Not then, and not now.”

“Well -- I wish I had called.” He swallows. “I missed you.”

Steve goes still. He stares at him, and his face breaks, and he looks away shaking his head.

“I wish you'd called, too.” Steve says, voice a strained hush. “I-- *god* , Billy, you have no idea how much I've missed you.”

It breaks him a little bit. And he wants to reach out, to wrap his arms around Steve, but he doesn't. Instead, he puts his hand out, fingers brushing over Steve's. Unsure.

An offer.

Just holding Steve's hand feels like it's too much to ask, a lofty pipe dream.

“It looks like you've been doing okay,” Billy says. About the pool. About the lights. About Steve looking less anxious and less tired.

Steve's fingers curl into his.

“Well,” Steve says, half laughing. “Half a decade helps.”

Billy threads his fingers into Steve's, savoring that warmth for a beat. “It does.” Then, he stands, and tugs Steve toward the door. “Come on. Lets go grill while we're still high enough to tolerate those losers.”

-*-

It's easy to forget he's been five years gone when surrounded by familiar faces. The kids are grown, the adults a little older, but not much has changed. Watching them play around, laughing and drinking and eating, is like being eighteen again.

Or maybe it's just Steve that makes him feel that way.

Jonathan and Nancy had shown, not long after Steve and Billy and rejoined the party. They'd pulled Steve away, after greeting the kids, to catch up. Steve has got Nancy tucked up against one side while Jonathan talks with his hands -- and there's so much fondness there, none of the reserved way Steve used to treat them, that Billy wonders how they grew close again over the years.

“You're staring,” Max says, wading up to Billy's legs where he's got them dangled in the pool, and Billy remembers a conversation like this from forever ago.

There's no otter pops this time, though.

“Yeah, well,” Billy says, no longer ashamed about it. But he tears his eyes off of Steve and his friends anyway, turning his attention on Max. “It’s weird, being back.”

Max snorts. “Doesn't seem all that weird with you trying to get into Steve's pants again.”

Billy just huffs. “I’m not trying to get into his pants, you twerp.”

Billy splashes water at her with his feet.

No, when he tries to get into someone’s pants, it’s a whole other animal and *impossible* to miss. It’s selfish and messy and -- and Billy wouldn’t do that to Steve. He doesn’t just want to get into Steve’s *pants* -- he wants way more than that.

Always has.

Max flicks some water at him, propping herself onto her elbows at the ledge. She looks at him for a long second, something thoughtful and knowing furrowing her brow.

“He was kinda messed up when you left,” Max says. “And I know *you* were. You were, like, extra nice and shit whenever you called.”

She laughs when he splashes her again.

“I'm just saying,” Max shrugs. “It would suck to see you guys like that again.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Billy says. “Because nothing’s going to happen. I’m only around for like, a week.”

It doesn’t make him feel *good* to know that Steve was messed up when he left, but it makes him feel a little less bad for being so fucked up over it for so long. Not that anyone needs to know just *how* long Billy was a loser for.

Max gives him a *look* . “Uh huh. You know, I was actually hoping you'd stick around a while longer.”

“What, like -- the whole summer, again?” Billy asks, feeling a little frozen, despite the lingering heat of sundown.

“Maybe,” Max shrugs. “And then maybe, if you're here in August, you can drive me across with you.”

It’s like world stops turning a little bit. Everything around them suddenly goes quiet, muffled.

“What?” he asks, almost hesitant.

Billy has no idea where she’s going to college. She had said it was a *surprise* . She can’t be serious.

She can't hide her smile. But she tries for casual. Tries to shrug it off.

“Yeah, you know. You can drop me off. UCLA isn't *that* far from your place.”

Billy wants to hug her. He does much less well at hiding his own grin.

“Jesus Christ, Max.” Billy can barely contain himself, excited at the prospect of having her close. “Holy *shit* .”

“Yeah?” Max perks, like she wasn't sure if Billy would like it.

“I’d hug you, if I had brought a change of clothes.”

But hell, he thinks. He’s borrowed Steve Harrington’s clothes before -- he could do it again.

And with that, Billy pushes off the side of the pool, into the water, and tugs Max into his arms, clothes soaking wet, Max laughing in his arms.

Dustin shouts from halfway across the pool, dripping on the pavement, when he catches sight of it. “ *Adult swim!”*

“No, no, no --” Steve is already shaking his head, but Dustin is coming for him and Nancy, and Mike and Will for Jonathan.

By the side, Hopper tips back his beer and gives El a look as the others go splashing.

“Don't even think about it, kid.”

El lifts a brow, jerks her head, and Hopper comes stumbling to the edge.

“Alright, alright,” Hopper sighs, crouches, and sets his beer aside;

Max is still laughing in Billy's arms. "Joyce, get over here."

She does, without preamble, and he scoops her up with a grunt and jumps in.

Steve shoves Dustin under. "You're all going home wet. And not getting any damn cake."

Billy feels *warm* . And *happy* . And *welcome* . All at once. It's overpowering, but in the sweet kind of way, in a way he doesn't think he's ever truly felt before.

"Thank you," he murmurs into Max's ear, arms still tight around her. "Glad you're my sister, Max."

Max tightens her hold on him. "So you'll stay? At least for a while?"

Billy makes a noise. "I'll have to make some calls."

He's never *taken* a vacation before from the garage. But it's not impossible. He could swing it. At least for a little while longer. For Max.

For himself, too.

"But yeah," Billy says, fielding a splash from Dustin and splashing back hard enough that it hits both Dustin and Steve. "Yeah, I'll stay for a little while."

"Yes!" Max's arms shoot up and she collapses back into the water with a laugh, before paddling off toward El. "He's gonna *stay!"*

Billy rolls his eyes and finds the wall again, leaning up against it until Steve comes over to join him.

"I'm gonna need to borrow some clothes," Billy says.

Soaked and pushing his hair from his face, Steve grins. "Yeah, you and everyone else."

"Yeah?" Billy says. "And you're not going to give me first pick?"

He remembers wearing Steve's clothes that fateful day, picking up ice cream and aloe, and getting cornered by Max. He wishes he had kept something of Steve's, something to remember him by, all these years.

"And pick you over the Chief of Police?" Steve shakes his head. "Not likely. You can't give me a ticket for speeding in a school zone."

"Then maybe you shouldn't speed in school zones," Billy grins.

"And give up my life of crime?" Steve clicks his tongue. "That's too big a price to pay, Billy Hargrove."

Billy hums and leans his soggy shoulder against Steve's. "But for putting clothes on my back?" Billy says. "Aren't you supposed to be kind and shit?"

"Oh, is that what I am? Kind and shit?" Steve asks. "And out of the kindness of my heart I'm supposed to dress you?"

Billy's pretty sure that he wants the *opposite* of that. But he'll settle for that shirt he borrowed five years ago, worn and soft and smelling like Steve.

"Maybe I should tell Max you're being all kinds of mean to me," Billy says. "How am I supposed to stick around all summer, now?"

Steve looks at him sharply, suddenly, head jerking around so fast it would almost be funny if it weren't for the way his eyes went wide, his lips parting. If it weren't for the way he looks at Billy like he doesn't believe him.

"Excuse me?"

"What, that you're like, the meanest babysitter, or that I'm crashing on all these asshole's last real summer vacation?"

"You're--" Steve blinks, inches back a bit, and his throat works when he swallows. "You're staying all summer?"

For a moment, Billy can't help the white hot panic in his gut. Steve doesn't look -- well, he doesn't really look *happy* about it. And that's -- the last thing Billy wants.

To be around when Steve doesn't want him there.

“Well, I mean, Max asked me to,” Billy says. “It means a lot to her, but --” He runs a hand through damp hair. “I'll see what I can do at work, so. Maybe, maybe not.”

“Right,” Steve says, nodding, almost dumb-- he looks away, to the water and the kids playing, to Hopper picking El up and tossing her back in with a splash. “That would be good for her. Having you around for a while. You should--”

Steve stops. Half chokes on the word and then looks at Billy, eyes dark and deep with something Billy thinks is heartbreak.

“You should stay,” Steve says, on a breath, and then he’s shoving himself up and out of the water. “I’m gonna go grab everybody some towels.”

Yeah, like *that* answered *any* of Billy's questions and didn't leave him reeling, more confused than ever before.

-*-

It’s well past midnight when the kids start rolling out. Apparently, instead of curling up in the vast space of Steve's house, it was tradition to spend the night at the Byers’.

Billy wouldn't choose any house over Steve Harrington’s, let alone that house. But he wasn't them, and didn't have the same attachment to it.

Hopper is lingering by the door, waiting for El and Max to finish changing. Steve is in the kitchen, having already shooed off Joyce and Nancy and Jonathan from clean up duty.

Billy isn't sure if he should go say goodbye or if he should just take off. He hasn't had a chance to talk to him again; doesn't know what to make of Steve telling him to stay and then running away from him.

Max pads up, hair still wet and pleated back, swimsuit dangling from her fingers. “What are your plans tomorrow?”

Billy shrugs. He wasn't exactly sure how to occupy his time when it had been a *week* . Now that it's looking like the whole summer, *maybe* -- he's got no goddamn idea.

"I figured I'd spend enough of my time here bothering you until I got on your nerves so bad you could go another five years without seeing me," Billy says. "Didn't know you'd be coming to California. Thought I'd only be here a week."

He doesn't know what he's supposed to do with himself in Hawkins, other than soak up the sun.

Max hums. "Well, I know we're driving out to the quarry tomorrow, if you want. Steve will be there."

"Yeah, uh," Billy says, glancing into the kitchen from where he's standing. "I figure I should probably check to make sure that's *fine* with our king in there."

"Did you *ask* him?" Max's lifts a brow.

"He seemed -- well, he seemed kinda *weird* with the idea of me staying for the summer," Billy says, voice pitched low.

"Did he say you shouldn't stay?"

"No," Billy says, shaking his head. "But he didn't seem happy about it."

Max rolls her eyes. "Oh, my god. Just go *ask* ."

Billy shoves Max a little, ruffling her hair. "Go have fun at your sleepover, twerp."

He loops her into a hug, lets her bat at him a little, and then escapes into the kitchen where Steve is washing dishes.

"Need any help?" Billy asks.

Steve blinks up at him and offers a tired little smile, looking at what's left of the dishes, of the trash piled on one of the counters.

“I think I can probably handle it. I'm sure you want to get some rest, get back to your --” Steve pauses, wiping his hands dry and leaning a hip on the counter. “You know, I actually don't know where you're staying.”

Billy slips a hand into his pocket and pulls out his motel key. He eyes the name on it, makes a face. It’s so forgettable.

“Lake View Motel.”

It’s fine. It’s a place to stay.

“Look,” Billy starts, then stops, because he doesn’t really know how exactly he’s supposed to phrase this.

Steve's brows arch up, arms crossing loosely over his chest. Waiting.

Billy kind of misses when Steve would just look at him and *know* .

“Do you give a shit if I come to the quarry tomorrow?”

“No,” Steve says, brows pulling together. “I'm not your keeper, Billy. Just because we… have a history, doesn't mean -- I mean, you can go wherever you like.”

Billy frowns. He can feel the way his face changes with it, with the frustration and the tiredness.

“Okay,” he says. “You’re not my keeper, but if you hated the idea, I wouldn’t do it. I’m not trying to fucking -- step on your toes, or whatever.”

“I don't hate the idea, Billy.” Steve sighs, turning back to the dishes, hands slow as he washes them. “Will it be hard to have you around? Maybe. So far, I think we're doing pretty well. But I'm not gonna lie and say I don't feel something about it -- because I do. Seeing you again, having you here, possibly all summer? It's not like it's gonna be an easy walk in the park.”

And Billy -- wasn't really expecting that. The honesty.

But then he kind of forgot Steve's not eighteen anymore, either.

“I think it's great, that you want to stay and spend the summer here with Max. She deserves that, and so do you.” Steve says. “And I wouldn't be against seeing you, either. But we *do* have a history, Billy. And it's not necessarily all pretty.”

Billy’s not entirely sure *how* that makes him feel. A little bit empty, a little bit twisted up inside. He had thought, maybe, *foolishly* , that they could just kind of jump back in. Which -- he’s aware that that’s *stupid* . But he can’t help the lovesick fantasy of it, the idiotic part of him that has always been so gone for Steve Harrington that it overwrote basic common sense.

“Okay,” he says. “You’re right.” He doesn’t know what else to say. “If you don’t need any help, I guess I’ll just…” he gestures at the door. “But thanks. For tonight. It was fun.”

“Hey,” Steve catches him, as he turns, by the wrist with a hand that's soapy and wet and warm. “That door is still open for you, Billy. Whenever you want it. I know we -- well, it's been a while. And we weren't always… talking, when you came over.”

His face colors. Like he's remembering exactly what they've done in this house. In this *kitchen* .

“But there's always a key,” Steve adds, throat working. “And I'm here. Always have been.”

“Okay,” Billy says, nodding. “Okay.”

Like maybe, there’s a faint glimmer of a hope there.

Steve hasn't let him go, yet. “So I'll see you. Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Billy says.

-*-

It's more humid out here than on the coast. Billy forgot about that until he was stepping into the muggy sun, tugging at his shirt as he slammed his door shut and made his way over to where the kids had staked their claim.

They're better set up. Billy spies a cooler nestled in the center of one of the floats. He would put money on the fact that they've probably got booze hiding in there, away from where Steve could catch them. As if he doesn't know what they're up to.

They've even got a little radio blasting what Billy would consider questionable music from where Steve is sitting, in an unfoldable lawn chair, book in hand and brows pinched. When he gets close enough to see the title -- *The Liar* -- Billy understands why his lips are quirked but pressed thin.

Billy eyes the scene, unsure, but walks closer anyway.

“And here I thought I was all prepared with a blanket,” Billy says, blanket tucked underneath his arm.

Steve blinks up at him, a pair of glasses perched on his nose, like he's some nerd’s wet dream, and smiles. “We've refined our style a bit.”

“Looks like I have a lot of catching up to do,” Billy says, eyeing the spot next to Steve. “Mind if I spread out?”

He knows it's not the same, knows this is going to be rough, but he can at least *try* right? Any second spent with Steve is better than none.

Steve gestures with the book. “Go for it.”

Once he has it all situated, Billy flops down on his back, finding the nicest patch of sun he can.

“So,” Billy says, after a little while of silence. The kids are chattering and splashing in the background, sounding way too familiar. “Are those the new specs?”

He can't help but notice, can't help but ask.

Steve takes them off, smile rueful. “Unfortunately. Dustin kept making fun of me for squinting.”

“To his credit,” Billy says, “you’re way too young for wrinkles.”

The sky is so blue he could swim in it, could drown in it. Tree branches creep into his vision, a partial lifeline to reality. If Billy closes his eyes -- which he does -- he can almost pretend that no time has passed. The music is different, but the air is the same. The ground underneath his back feels just like it did five years ago. The kids sound older, but their shouts across the quarry echo just the same in his ears.

“I like them,” Billy says, into the bright darkness behind his eyelids. Because he can’t help himself.

Steve doesn't say anything, but Billy can hear him move. Can hear the groan of the chair beneath him.

When he looks, because he can't help that either, Steve has the book held open and face down on one knee. He's fidgeting with frame of the glasses, thick and black, and his smile his small. His face is pink. Billy tries to tell himself it's just because it's warm.

“I've been told they make me look like Clark Kent,” Steve says, when he catches Billy looking.

“Does that mean you’ve got a secret identity -- King Steve?” Billy catches himself, too easily slipping into the desire to call him *pretty boy* , too caught up in old memories.

Steve hums. “Maybe.”

“So, what’s your superpower? Herding teenagers?”

Steve's nose wrinkles up. “Horrible superpower. I'd much prefer flying.”

Billy lets himself fall backward again, eyes closed. “Flying would be nice,” he says. “I always thought being telekinetic would be cool, when I was a kid.”

“I think it would be a little too complicated,” Steve says, a bit slowly. “Telekinesis. Moving stuff around with your head, like that. Might wake up with your bed off the ground.”

“A reasonable price to pay for being lazy,” Billy says. “I mean, come

on . Think of all the crazy shit you could do."

"Like what?" Steve laughs.

That, Billy hasn't hugely thought about in years. He used to wish for all sorts of things -- like invisibility, or super strength, or super healing -- but telekinesis is the most fun option.

"Well, for starters, I could get myself a drink without having to *get up* ," he says, like it's the hardest thing to do in the world.

Steve clicks his tongue. "That's a one way street to a beer belly. But I get what you're saying. Bring things to you, move stuff out of the way. Food, the remote, *people."*

Billy pats at his stomach through his shirt. "Well, I'm getting closer to that every day."

Which is a lie, because he's still pretty fit -- just not what he was before.

"But," Billy says, tone turning thoughtful and a little playful. "You're right. It *would* be great for moving people around in certain -- situations."

Steve's cheeks burn a little brighter and he clears his throat, hesitates, and then wets his lips. "Situations?"

Billy pushes himself up a little on his elbows, eyes on Steve. He raises his eyebrows.

"I don't think that's appropriate talk for this -- situation," Billy says, with a smirk.

It doesn't really help that he doesn't know how Steve would respond to that kind of thing.

Steve looks away, back toward the water. Billy knows the flush on his skin is more than just the heat.

It's a bit of a comfort. Even more of a thrill. Knowing that he can still get Steve *warm* with just a few words and a smile.

“Probably not,” Steve says.

But other than the flush, Billy has no real idea what Steve thinks. If his comments are welcome or not.

“But it would be cool,” Billy says, after a minute. “I mean, *the possibilities.* ”

“There's quite a few,” Steve says, huffing out a laugh of a breath, glancing over at him again.

Billy falls silent. He wants to keep joking, to keep pressing -- but he doesn't want to push too hard. Doesn't want to rock the boat too much.

After a little while of staring at the sky, Max suddenly appears in his field of vision.

“You made it!”

Her wet hair drips quarry water on his face. Billy squirms and sits up, making a face. “Ugh, *gross* , Max.”

Hands on her hips, Max huffs out a breath. “Nice to see you, too.”

Billy grunts, then wipes off his face with his shirt, lifting it up from the hem. Then, he decides to just rip off the shirt entirely.

“Ugh,” Max says. “Show some decency.”

Billy laughs and gestures at Steve, sitting in his trunks, towel over his shoulders. “ *He’s* not wearing a shirt.”

“ *He* isn't my gross older brother,” Max says, focus turning on Steve. “You actually getting in the water?”

“Probably,” Steve says. “It is a little warm.”

Billy grunts again. Years ago, he would've argued that he was Max’s *step-* brother. Now, he wouldn't dare.

“This is blatant favoritism,” Billy says, no hint of animosity in his

voice. Just amusement.

“He's cuter than you,” Max says, smile prim.

Billy hums. He looks at Steve, and the shrugs.

“I mean, *yeah* .” Because obviously.

Steve huffs out a sound, face red but smile fond. “Was there something else? Or do you just need my help dunking the boys?”

“As if El can't take care of that for me,” Max scoffs. She turns back to Billy. “Actually, I was going to see if you would come in the water.”

Billy doesn’t even need to consider it; he just makes a face. “Absolutely not. That water is *disgusting* .”

“It's not,” Max insists. “It's like lake water.”

Steve waffles a hand. “He's right. It's kinda gross.”

Max crosses her arms. “So you're not gonna get in either?”

Steve huffs, dog-earring his book and setting it aside with his glasses, whipping off the towel draped over his shoulders as he stands. “I never said *that* . But you better warn them to hide the booze cooler. I swore an oath to Hop that I'd tell him if I saw anything.”

Max’s eyes go wide and she darts off, splashing back into the wake. “Steve's coming in!”

Steve laughs, standing there, at the mad scramble Max's shout causes. He's lovely, in the afternoon light, all the skin on display. Dotted the same way Billy remembers, pale the way Billy remembers. Probably just as soft, too. Just as warm.

Even with the scar, ugly and deep as it is, at his shoulder and tearing into his back. Like something sunk their teeth in and didn't want to let go.

Steve looks at him. “You sure you don't want to get in?”

Billy has a hard time pulling his eyes away from Steve's shoulder now that it's uncovered, now that he can see. He wants to know everything, wants to know how long Steve has had it, where it came from -- everything.

It takes Billy a moment to respond.

"I didn't bring anything," he says, finally. "To wear in the water."

"They don't have skinny dipping in California?" Steve asks, and other than a roll of his shoulders, seems unbothered by Billy's stare.

He must've had it for a while, then.

Billy makes a face. " *Max* is in the water," he says. "As much as I'd *love* to go skinny dipping with you, King Steve, I think we can save that for your pool, no?"

Steve snorts. "Don't make promises you won't keep, Billy."

And that sounds an awful lot like *permission* . Gives Billy all kinds of ideas.

Like seeing Steve's skin lit up in blue. Like tracing those scars and finding anything else that's new on Steve's body.

"Try not to burn," Steve says, and then he's padding away, heading for the water.

-*-

The sun's already getting low in the sky by the time the kids finally decide they're done splashing around in the water and playing games on their towels.

They're probably a little drunk, but Billy can't blame them. He remembers how he spent his summer after graduating -- though he does hope that they're a bit more tame. A bit less reckless.

"You want me to drive you *where* ?" Billy asks, trying not to make it seem like he notices that Max is way taller than him. Trying to maintain *some* sort of authority.

“It's just an abandoned building, Billy.” Max says, bouncing on her toes. “We go and tag it, snoop around, light bonfires. It's fun.”

“Yeah, because getting arrested for arson is a real trip. Have you ever *been* arrested, kid? It’s no walk in the fucking park.”

With his hands on his hips, Billy feels a hell of a lot like Steve Harrington. Steve, who’s currently helping Dustin corral a cooler into his car with very little luck. Dustin keeps *dropping* his side, fumbling with it, like his arms are made of jelly. Like he’s real drunk.

Or, like he’s stalling.

Billy looks back at Max.

“Why can’t you go and get high like every other teenager?” he asks.

“Maybe that's what we're doing,” Max says.

“Give me one good reason,” he says. “Because I *know* you’re only asking me because someone else already said no.”

Mom said no, but maybe dad’ll say yes , Billy thinks.

“It's tradition,” Max says. “And we'll get there either way. But it would be safer if someone sober was behind the wheel.”

Billy can’t argue with that. “And you’re all supposed to fit in my car how, exactly?”

“We'll manage.”

Somehow, and Billy’s not exactly sure how, but they cram into his backseat and passenger seat. Dustin is hollering at him from the window to hurry up and Steve is watching, brows pinched, bemused.

Billy shuffles, hovering.

“You sure you don't want me to take a few of them?”

Billy remembers Max's hissed *don't tell Steve* .

So, Billy just shrugs and puts on a grin.

“What, you think I’m not capable?” He laughs and claps Steve on his once-again towel-covered shoulder. “I can handle a few teenagers. Don’t worry about me.”

Even though Billy wants to stay, to linger in Steve’s orbit.

Steve glances beyond Billy at the kids.

“I'm more worried about your suspension.” But then he's meeting Billy's eyes again, shoulders easy, smile soft. “What are you doing after you've dropped them off?”

“Dunno,” Billy says with a slow smile. “Why, you got any plans I can crash?”

“No, not -- not *plans.* ” Steve says. “But I thought maybe I could treat you to dinner. Welcome you back propper, milkshake and everything. I'd offer to cook, but I kinda got eaten out of house and home yesterday, and I haven't had time to grocery shop.”

It's not really an invitation that Billy saw coming. After their talk at the house the previous day -- well, Billy thought he'd be lucky to get some time with Steve and that was it. Not, well, whatever *this* is.

“That sounds great,” Billy says, heart hammering into his throat. “Where should we meet?”

“You remember where the diner is?”

Billy nods. He couldn’t *forget* . Just like he knew the way to Steve’s house like the back of his hand, even though he didn’t know the address.

“Yeah, of course,” he says, and thinks of Steve licking whipped cream off a cherry, of fishing his own out of Steve’s glass.

“Then meet me there at seven,” Steve says. “My treat.”

“It’s a date,” Billy says, turning on his heel and heading back to his car.

He’s got no goddamn idea if it *is* a date, but it’s damn well closer than

he ever thought he'd get again.

-*-

The diner, just like most everything else in Hawkins, is unchanged. Other than an updated jukebox, it still has the same cracked vinyl, the same old man in the kitchen, and the same over roasted coffee beans.

Steve is already there when Billy gets there. He's chatting with the waitress, smiling, looking a little sunkissed on the nose -- hair hanging in his face, clothes pressed in neat lines.

He sits up, perks up, when he spots Billy. "Hey."

Billy is *extremely* glad he swung by the hotel to grab a change of clothes. In a tee and jeans he feels much more worthy of Steve, instead of in clothes damp with sweat and sticky with the smell of the quarry.

"Hey," Billy says.

He flashes a smile at the waitress -- someone he *doesn't* recognize, but doesn't mind charming all the same. It's a little different, now, though: he's still all grins, all flirt, but there's no promise there like there used to be. No impending follow through.

After all, Billy doesn't have to pretend anymore.

He slides into the booth opposite Steve and leans back, making himself comfortable. "I hope you weren't waiting long."

"Just long enough to order coffee," Steve says, lifting a mug clouded with cream.

Billy thinks of drinking coffee on Steve's front step, of curling up with a book with his back pressed against the door while Steve slept. He thinks of Dustin showing up, of bribing him away just for a *little* more time with Steve.

"I'll have a cherry milkshake, please," Billy asks the waitress, when she turns back to him. "Since you did promise me one," he says, at

Steve.

Steve's smile broadens a bit. He sips his coffee, looks at Billy with bright eyes through thick lashes, and then sets his cup aside.

“And two slices of cherry pie,” Steve says, to the waitress, grin wry. “Since we're trying to spoil our dinner.”

“Anything else, Mr. Harrington?” the girl asks, popping her gum, glancing between the two of them like she isn't sure who she wants to give her attention to first.

“Not yet,” Steve says, then glances at Billy. “Unless you already know what you want?”

“I always know what I want,” Billy says, never taking his eyes off Harrington.

There was a time the words would’ve been a threat. It still kind of is.

Steve blinks. His face colors.

“Cheeseburger and fries for me, then.” Steve says.

The waitress bobs her head. “And you?”

“Same for me,” Billy grins. “And I’ll take it as rare as they’ll make it.”

“You got it,” she says, jotting their order down. “I'll get that pie right out to you, and your shake.”

When she's gone and it's just Steve and Billy, Steve lets out a breath and slumps back in his seat.

“You get the kids there without killing them?” Steve asks.

“Please,” Billy says, leaning back in his seat, eyes following the lines of Steve’s body, thinking about the way his skin looks underneath his clothes. “I think they’re much more likely to kill me at this point. I’m surprised you’re still kicking, honestly. I would’ve thought they’d have run you into the ground by now, *Mr. Harrington* .”

They don’t have muscles, but they *do* have the advantage of being unpredictable hormone-driven machines. Billy remembers how it was, back then.

“I've had a couple close calls,” Steve says, and Billy thinks it's supposed to be a joke -- but it sounds too honest.

Stupidly, Billy thinks, *I should’ve been there to protect you* .

From what? he immediately thinks, afterwards. Because Steve talked about monsters, about being scared, but Billy has never really been sure exactly *what* they had been talking about. High, it had all made sense. In the sober light of day, he had felt lost, had been unsure how to bring it up again. So -- he just never had.

He regrets that, too.

The pink milkshake appears in front of him, saccharine smelling and topped with whipped cream and a cherry. Years ago, Billy wouldn’t have deigned to eat something so girly. Now, he just looks over it and smiles at Steve as he takes his first thick sip through the straw.

“So, what has *Mr. Harrington* been up to, other than charming all Hawkins’ single women?” Billy asks, glancing over at their waitress, who is hovering by her station, stealing quick glances at their table.

Once upon a time, Billy would’ve thought the glances were for him. But Steve, in his perfectly fitted shirt and his glasses? Yeah, there’s no way all that looking’s just for Billy.

Steve snorts, gaze straying to his coffee. “There's not much more outside of what you already know. Tried for my dad's business for a while, until he passed. Took some time off working after that. Before that, too, but for different reasons.”

Steve's brow pinches. Like he's trying to drag up memories years too old.

“Spent a few months in Florida. At the end of the next summer after you left. Got into an accident and had to recover.” Steve shrugs. “But mostly I've just been… here. Working, wrangling the kids, helping Hopper. That kind of shit.”

Billy doesn’t have to ask about the accident being the same that gave Steve those painful looking scars. He’d give anything to run his fingertips over them, though. To feel for himself. To apologize for not being there.

“Spending summers lounging by the quarry getting pink, still?” Billy says, touching his own nose, to indicate that Steve’s is a little pink.

“Most of them,” Steve says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Though, I've been traveling a bit more, now that everyone's a little older. Sometimes I'll spend a week in Chicago with Nancy and Jonathan. I've been up and down the east coast.”

“Never to California?” Billy asks, eyebrows raised.

“Never been out that far west,” Steve shakes his head. “Thought about it, but… there was only one thing I wanted to see out there, and I didn't know how to find it.”

Billy frowns, hurt and guilt eating away at the bottom of his ribcage. He stirs the whipped cream into his shake with his straw.

“Did you know Max and I kept in touch?” he asks, after a moment, not entirely sure what he should say.

“No. She never mentioned it.” Steve makes a face. “I actually think she blamed me, for a while there. She grew out of it, though.”

Billy huffs out a laugh.

“Oh, she definitely blamed me, too, so don’t feel too special.” He then shrugs and takes another sip of the shake. “She also blamed herself, which was probably why you got some of that anger. I think, of everyone, you don’t deserve any of the blame at all.”

“Ah, but if I hadn't *seduced* you, you wouldn't have had to run away.” Steve says, but it's with another one of those wry grins; he sounds like he's quoting someone.

Probably Max.

Billy can’t help it; he full on *laughs* . It’s loud in the small diner, but

it’s not nearly as mean sounding as it once was. There’s still some hard edges to him, but so many of them have faded with the sun and the waves of time.

“Pretty sure I had a thing for you before we even talked, so. She doesn’t have a leg to stand on, there.”

Steve's eyes flit over his face. “Before we even talked, huh? Are you telling me you had a crush on me, Billy Hargrove?”

Billy *shouldn’t* be embarrassed about it. Honestly, he thought Steve always just sort of *knew* that, with the way he made Billy always feel so transparent around him. Like everything he did was so loud Steve could hear his thoughts.

It’s weird, to think Steve *didn’t* know.

He can feel his cheeks getting a little warm, a little pink to match his milkshake.

“Obviously,” Billy says, going for the truth, instead of the way they they started out their thing, based on a premise that was -- only half true.

Steve hums, and he leans forward, like he's going to share a secret -- coming up short when their waitresses sidles up to the table. He jerks, blinking up at her, and then smiles.

She sets their pie down and tops off Steve's coffee. Tells them the rest of their order will be right out.

When she's gone, Steve stabs into his slice of pie, shuffling the crust around. “I did too. Have a crush, I mean.”

He feels a little flush, a little blindsided. “You had a crush on the guy who knocked you unconscious, pretty boy?”

The nickname falls so easily from his lips, Billy can’t even be mad about it.

Especially not when it makes Steve's face flush like that.

“Well, I kinda thought you were a complete psychopath, at first.” Steve says. “But you were the whole reason I realized I liked guys at all. It's probably because you knocked a few screws loose when you beat my ass.”

“I regret a hell of a lot about high school,” Billy says. “But I’m pretty sure that’s up there at the top of the list.”

Right up there with not getting to truly kiss Steve goodbye.

Steve sits back, eyeing him from across the table. Billy wonders what he's thinking, if he's remembering that night, too. If he ever hated Billy for it.

If he was ever afraid of him.

“If that's an apology, then you're forgiven.” Steve says. “It was a long time ago. And it was hardly the worst thing that ever happened to me. Don't wallow in it.”

Billy hums and takes a forkful of his own pie. “I’m not *wallowing* ,” he says, even though he probably *is* .

He’s probably spent more time thinking about his regrets in Hawkins than anything else, which is saying a lot. So much for uncaring Billy Hargrove.

“So, when’d you get that crush of yours?” Billy asks.

Steve grins. “You remember that last away game? At the end of March?”

Billy remembers. It was the game that won them the big, shiny county trophy still sitting in the awards case at the high school.

Tommy had fouled out. Steve had been subbed in. Billy and him had worked seamlessly. Worked hard. Ate up point after point of the other school's lead.

Steve had been knocked clean off his feet. Earned them two free throws that put them over.

The party afterward had been *stupid* .

“You got trashed that night,” Steve says. “And we weren't exactly on friendly terms, yet. But you lead me around the party like I was the second coming of Christ. It was one of the strangest, funniest parties of my life. You were charming and funny and *drunk* , but -- it was fun. And I kind of reveled in that attention. Wanted more of it.”

Steve pauses. Sips his coffee. Shrugs like none of this is a big deal.

“That's why I called a truce.” Steve adds. “Figured I could at least be friends with you, if nothing else. Though, I think we kind of skipped over a few steps, in the end.”

“ *Jesus* ,” Billy says, mid-bite through cherry pie. He chews, then swallows. “Honestly, I thought that party was mostly a *dream* .”

He remembers doing anything to keep his hands on Steve, to keep Steve looped under his arm. To keep booze-warm flesh against his own. He’d kept his space a little bit after that, knowing he was in way too deep.

Billy nearly startles when the waitress comes and sets their burgers down in front of them. It’s easy to push his pie to the side, though, to cram a few fries into his mouth just for something to do.

“We definitely skipped a few steps,” Billy says.

“Well, I always had a bad habit of jumping head first into situations I knew nothing about.”

“I think you did alright,” Billy says, grin a little playful. “I mean, let’s be real: I wasn’t exactly an *expert* .”

Steve snorts, muttering around a mouthful as he bites into his burger. “Better than Chris.”

It’s been years. *Years* .

And yet, Billy still feels the burn of jealousy in his gut, white hot, like it was just yesterday that they were -- whatever it was that they were.

“ *Chris* ?”

Billy could probably look a little less horrified, a little less blatantly *jealous* , but -- he doesn’t even try.

Steve hums an affirmative, bobbing his head. “That winter, after you left. It was-- *boring* . But I was lonely and drunk. He was interested and drunk. And it was awful. Like, genuinely the worst sex I've ever had. Especially since I only had you for comparison, and you were -- well.”

Steve's face colors again. He picks at his fries.

Even with the compliment, even with the memories all rushing back at him, Billy can’t help but feel envious. He knew -- well, he knew Steve’s life was going to continue on without him. It’d be idiotic to think otherwise. *Billy’s* life had gone on, just the same.

He has no right to feel anything. That doesn’t really *stop* him, though.

But he *is* kind of glad to hear it was terrible. It brings a little smile to his face, eases the feeling of jealousy just a bit.

“Glad I was your first, then,” Billy says, dropping his voice a little, pitching it low for more privacy. “Would’ve sucked for you if he had been. Wouldn’t want you to write the whole thing off for one bad experience, you know?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, eyeing him again, elbows resting on the table. “I'm glad you were my first, too.”

There’s a part of Billy that doesn’t believe it can be this easy. But there Steve is, sitting across from him at the diner, looking so familiar, so touchable. Billy can’t ignore how much he wants, or how deep that ache is.

“Pretty sure,” Billy squints, like he’s trying to remember, “there was something about you being my first, too, huh?”

Let’s pretend , Billy thinks, and sinks his teeth into his rare burger, chowing down.

Steve coughs around a bite. His ears are red.

“Something like that,” Steve croaks. “A few other firsts, too.”

Billy takes another bite and raises his eyebrow, wanting for Steve to continue.

Steve rolls his eyes, tossing a fry at him. “On my stairs, in the backseat of your car, in my *kitchen* .”

Billy grins, picks up the fry, and then eats it. “Can’t blame me,” he says. “That doesn’t sound half bad.”

My first love , Billy thinks, when he looks at Steve. He knows he wasn’t Steve’s, knows that Nancy came before him, but there’s no jealousy there, just reality.

“No,” Steve says, and his face softens some. “Not half bad at all.”

-*-

The rest of their dinner goes by easy. Talking and laughing and tossing fries between their plates.

It feels like everything they could've had -- bickering about Nirvana and grunge rock, sharing smiles, talking about the places Steve's been and the coast Billy loves, Steve stealing Billy’s shake halfway through their meal -- and like more than Billy could ever hope for.

When Steve's paid for the check and it's more than dark out, they walk outside together, heading for Billy’s Camaro and Steve's little hatchback he told Billy he'd exchanged his Bimmer for years ago. Steve pauses by Billy’s door, smoothing a hand over the hood.

“Can't believe this thing is still running with the way you drive,” Steve says.

“Hey now,” Billy says. “I take care of my baby. And I don’t drive *quite* as recklessly as I used to.”

“I'm sure highway patrol appreciates that,” Steve says. “Your blood pressure, too.”

Billy lets himself smile and take a step closer. “Glad you’re concerned about my safety after all these years, pretty boy.”

“It was hard not to be,” Steve admits, twisting to face him, resting back against the side of Billy’s car, eyes skirting over him. “You were so… *angry* . Like you wanted to fight the whole world. Was worried, for a while, about what trouble you might wind up in.”

“Not much trouble, honestly,” Billy says. He leans against the car, too, so they’re close. It’s comfortable, being so near Steve again. Familiar and exciting and exhilarating. “I left a lot of that in my old house, with Neil. I mean, I had the *usual* early-twenties shit. But I didn’t get arrested,which really -- you know.”

Steve hums, looking at him. Those big, dark eyes still somehow able to make Billy feel completely bare.

“Yeah. You seem -- better’s the wrong word, but…” Steve shrugs. “Less mad. Less wounded. You seem… good. Like you never needed my help at all.”

Billy can’t help himself. He reaches out, wraps his fingers around Steve’s wrist, fingers smoothing over his pulse point. Like he needs the land line right now, the anchor.

“I did,” Billy says.

I do, still, he thinks.

“Jesus, Steve. I needed you so bad.”

Steve's fingers flex out. He twists in Billy’s grip, shuffles close, and reaches up. Touches his fingertips to Billy’s cheek.

“No,” he says. “You've always been strong. You could've survived without me. Might've been better for it, too.”

Billy can barely *breathe* , Steve is so close. His skin is fever-hot underneath Steve’s fingertips, buzzing with the touch.

“God, you are so wrong about that,” Billy says.

He wants to kiss Steve so bad, wants to taste him again. He shouldn't, he *really shouldn't* -- but Steve is so close, and Steve is *touching him* , *looking* at him like that, so fond and so soft.

So, Billy dips close, closes the space between them, and presses his lips to Steve's.

It's perfect. For a moment, it's perfect. Like coming home.

Steve sways into him. His palm slides hot against his cheek. He makes a soft sound, breathy and sweet, and the taste of it is just as Billy remembers.

Then, Steve pulls back. Jerks back, really, like he wasn't expecting it.

"Billy," he says, like he's warning him, but his voice is shaking and his thumb drags against the line of his cheek.

Billy swallows, heart hammering so loud in his ears he can barely hear. It sounds a hell of a lot like a *no* , but Steve is too kind for that.

"Sorry," Billy hears himself say, taking a step back, pulling away from Steve's touch. "I thought you --" he stops himself and tries not to frown. Tries not to think that Steve pushed forward into his space, just a hair. "No -- *I* just --"

"I'm not mad," Steve says, and his throat is working, and he's backing up, putting distance between them. "But this -- this wasn't a date, Billy. This *can't* have been -- I can't --"

Steve's lashes flutter as he blinks a few times. Rapidly. Like he's catching his bearings.

"I, uh… I need to go." Steve says. "I'm sorry."

Billy wants to reach out, wants to catch Steve's wrist again under his fingers. But he doesn't. He respects the way Steve's put himself out of Billy's reach. Even though he hates it. And himself, a little, for ruining it.

"Sorry," Billy says again, and then clenches his jaw. "I'll see ya," he says, like it's *all fine* .

“Yeah,” Steve says, a bit too quickly. A bit like he's lying. “Yeah, I'll see you. Goodnight, Billy.”

And then he's walking away. Climbing into his car. Driving off before Billy can think of a way to make him stay.

It's painfully ironic.

-*-

“Are you coming to the quarry today?” Max asks the immediate second Billy opens the motel room door to her incessant knocking.

It’s bright. She’s loud.

Billy squints.

“Hold on,” Max says, pushing her way into the room. “Are you *hungover* ?” she asks.

“No,” he lies.

She reaches out and pulls at his shirt. It’s the one he wore last night. “Are you *still drunk* ?”

Maybe a little.

“No,” he says. “Where are my sunglasses? What time is it?”

“It's *noon* ,” Max huffs, shoving her way past him and sighing when she spots a near empty bottle by his bed. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” Billy says, flopping down on the bed with a groan. The ceiling is popcorn and looks terrible. “ *I* happened,” he amends, after not even five seconds. “I fucked up.”

“This have anything to do with Steve bailing for a shift at the library?” Max crosses her arms.

Well, now Billy is *definitely* not going to the quarry.

“I maybe kissed him” he says to the ceiling, because there’s no real point in beating around the bush, here.

Max plops down onto the bed next to him, groaning and bouncing Billy. “You *putz* .”

Billy echoes her groan. It helps that his head hurts, that he kind of wants to crawl into a hole and die.

“He was touching my *face* . He bought me a *milkshake* .” And that doesn't *mean* anything, Billy knows, but he thought that maybe it could have. Clearly not.

“Yeah, yeah.” Max says, whapping him in the chest with the back of her hand. “You're still in love with him. He's still in love with you. Blah, blah, blah. You kissed first, asked questions later. You're a *putz* .”

“If he was in love with me, Max, he wouldn’t have shoved me away and then made it *very clear* that it wasn’t a date. That he didn’t want that.”

Max covers her face with both hands and sighs. “Boys are so *stupid* .”

She stays like that for a second. Then, she shoves to her feet and reaches for Billy.

Grabbing him by the shirt front, she tugs until he gives. She wrangles him into a general upright position and then shoves a finger in his face.

“Listen,” Max takes a slow breath, mouth pressed thin, like she isn't sure she wants to say what she's about to say anyway. “Steve Harrington has been stupidly in love with the memory of you for *years* . Years, Billy. But, unlike *some* people, he knows when something's a bad idea.”

Billy opens his mouth to argue. To tell her to take it down a notch.

“Shut up, I'm not done.” Max slaps a hand over his mouth. “When you left, he was -- not great. He made some stupid, shitty decisions-- and I'm not saying it's your fault. Not at all. I'm saying -- I'm saying he's still ass over head for you, but maybe doesn't want to-- I dunno, Billy, maybe he doesn't want to start something he knows is gonna end again.”

And -- well, as much as he wants to, Billy *can't* argue with that.

He can't.

He swallows and slumps, letting his shoulders go a little slack.

Eventually, Max takes her hand away and gives him a look.

"Okay," he says. "I shouldn't have kissed him. It was dumb and impulsive. It was a *bad idea* ," he echoes. "But I did it. And I can only apologize so many times."

Max rolls her eyes. "I'm not saying *apologize.* "

"What are you saying, then?" Billy snaps. "Other than *it was a shitty idea* ."

"I'm *saying* ," and Max's voice pitches higher, louder, as if just to make Billy wince. "You want this? You want him? *Talk to him* . Don't just -- *do* . You have to talk to him."

"Okay, but, like, can you *please* keep your voice down?"

" *No* ," she says, even louder than before.

Billy groans and falls back onto his back.

After a minute, something lands on his face -- clothes.

"Get up. Shower. Get changed. You're going to take me out to breakfast at the diner."

"I don't want to go to the diner," Billy mumbles from under the pile.

"Well, you're *gonna* ," Max says. "And then you're gonna talk to Steve."

-*-

Billy sits outside of the library for too long. Long enough to work up a sweat in the heat, even with the windows rolled down. Long enough that he should be worried about a cop stopping by to make sure he's not some kind of child predator or something.

He ate the greasiest breakfast he could, trying to quell his throbbing head and the nausea eating at his gut. Max had shoved coffee after coffee at him, and water too.

And then she had threatened to drag Billy in to the library herself if Billy didn't swear to go in and track Steve down.

Billy would prefer not embarrassing himself any further. Having his sister pull him by the ear to talk to Steve Harrington would have just been the icing on the cake that Billy really didn't want to eat.

He finally drags himself out of the car, though, and braves his way inside. He gears himself up for wandering around for a while between the stacks, ready to go on a wild goose-chase for Steve Harrington, ready to never find him.

Which is why, of course, he's the first thing Billy sees when he opens the doors. There, sitting at the little desk, shuffling through stacks of papers, is Steve goddamn Harrington, glasses and all.

Billy walks up to the desk.

When Steve doesn't notice him, he coughs.

"Can I help you --?" Steve blinks up, hands full of papers, and freezes. "Billy."

Billy's heart kind of freezes, too.

What the *fuck* is he supposed to say?

"Can we talk?" he asks. "I mean, like, do you have a second?"

Steve falters, looks down at his desk, and then over at the cart full of returned books. He pushes to his feet, shoves his stupid glasses up into his hair, and clears his throat as he gestures back toward the stacks.

He wheels the cart back as Billy trails after him. From behind, Billy can see the rigid line of his shoulders. Can see the way he's carrying so much weight on them.

Hates it.

Steve turns before Billy gets a chance to try and apologize again.

“You dropped the kids off at the *lab* last night?” Steve hisses, in the hush of the stacks.

This is not at all what Billy thought they’d be talking about.

“Uh, that abandoned place in the middle of the woods?” Steve shushes him and Billy drops his voice. “Yeah, I did. So what?”

“And you *left them there* ?” Steve snags up a book, shoving it into place on the shelf. “Alone. You left them there alone.”

“Yes?” Billy says, feeling a little blindsided by this, a little peeved. He’s so woefully unprepared that he can’t help but be annoyed at his own idiocy. “I mean, sure it’s *dumb* , but I did worse shit at their age. Look, it’s not like they got arrested, right? So, what’s a little petty vandalism?”

“Petty vandalism. Right.” Steve huffs to himself, shoving another book into place. “I'm sure that's *exactly* what they were doing.”

“What, you think they were doing something *worse* ?”

“ *Yes* -- Well, no, but --” Steve stops, faces him, and lowers his voice to a whisper. “Listen, you don't know how dangerous that place is. You can't just-- you can't just *do stuff* like that without thinking about the consequences.”

Billy suddenly thinks Steve isn't just talking about the kids and the abandoned lab.

“Even if it's a slap on the wrist for petty vandalism,” Steve adds, turning back to his cart and wheeling it around a corner.

Billy follows him. Because he isn't done, he isn't just going to let Steve walk away. Because Steve hasn't told him to leave, yet.

“I'm sorry,” Billy says carefully. “I should've -- thought about the consequences. I've never been good about thinking things through.

And I -- I know I need to work on it.”

Billy steps in a little closer.

“Everything's fine. Right?”

Even though Billy knows that's bullshit.

Steve pulls his glasses down to rest on his nose, squinting at the small gold lettering of a spine well worn, hair falling into his face. He slides it into place between two similar texts.

“Of course it's fine. The kids didn't have a scratch on them.” Steve says, like he's being deliberately obtuse.

Billy wants to bang his head against the shelving. Wants to grab Steve and stop him from moving -- jittery and nervous -- distracting himself with busy hands. Wants to kiss him and tell him he's sorry, over and over, until Steve kisses him back.

But this isn't some cheesy romance movie. Billy can't just wish it all better.

“I'm sorry,” he says, *again* , because there isn't anything else to say. “It was stupid and rash and fuck it -- I *wanted to* . I wanted to kiss you from the moment I saw you again.”

Steve freezes again. Goes still and quiet, and in the hush of the library, Billy can hear his breath. Steady, slow, like he's counting each inhale and exhale.

His fingers linger on the spine of a book. His head droops and he closes his eyes. His throat works.

“Steve --”

“Don't,” he breathes, eyes still closed, brows pinching. “Please, don't. I can't -- I can't say no to you, I never fucking could, and I--”

He looks at him, finally. Meets his eyes proper, for the first time, and Billy would know that look of longing anywhere.

He's seen it enough on his own face.

“That morning, when you left and I asked you not to wake me before you went -- I was pretending. I was pretending to sleep because I didn't want to say goodbye.” Steve's voice cracks. “I wanted -- I wanted to pretend that, if I just kept my eyes closed long enough, I'd open them and you'd be back. I wanted to pretend that the night lasted forever and you never left. I wanted to pretend you *stayed.”*

Billy chokes. His heart feels like it stops dead in his chest, silence ringing around them as loud as thunder.

“Fuck,” Billy says, voice rough, like he's been crying for hours.

He takes a half, clumsy, step forward, and reaches out. Fingers falling in the fabric of Steve's shirt, not on his skin. Maybe just because he’s scared Steve is going to run away.

“Leaving you was the hardest thing I've ever done. It was -- it nearly killed me. But I *had* to, Steve. I had to.” Billy takes a deep breath, unsteady and ragged. “I'm sorry,” he says again. “Kissing you yesterday was selfish and greedy and I should've -- thought. Should've asked.”

Steve lets out a heavy breath, but he doesn't pull away. “I know you had to leave. And I never asked you to stay. Maybe because I was afraid you wouldn’t. Maybe because I was afraid you *would* . But either way, I've watched you leave twice. Don't start something and make me watch you leave again.”

The words are a lead weight in his chest.

“Max is coming to California for me,” Billy says, and the words feel strange in his mouth. Too big, too round. “I can’t *stay* .”

“Then, I can't --” Steve falters, breathes in sharp, and steps back slow with a helpless shrug. “Then, I can't. No matter how much I still --”

Want you, need you, love you , Billy thinks, hears what's unsaid ring in his ears.

“I can't.” Steve says, shaking his head. “I'm sorry. I know that makes

me a coward. But I don't want my heart to break again."

"Okay," Billy manages, teeth clenching together just to keep it all together. "That's -- it's okay."

Billy, who would break his heart open every day just to be able to kiss Steve again. And the worst part is, though: he gets it. He absolutely understands. And he doesn't *want* to hurt Steve.

"Can I," Billy says, "I mean, can we still hang out? I'm here all summer. And I -- fuck, I *miss* you."

Steve laughs, and it sounds wet and strained, like he's a second from crying. He shoves his hand up under his glasses to rub at his eyes.

"Yes," he says, word breaking out of his mouth, and he shuffles forward, reaches out, and grips Billy's shirt with both hands.

He tugs and presses his face to Billy's collar. Hides there.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm sorry."

It's so natural to wrap his arms around Steve, to pull him close into a hug, even though they never did too much of that. It was a fun summer that they had together -- frantic, hot, ardent, dripping with emotion -- but they could have spent more time like this, Billy thinks. They could've gotten to know each other slowly. Could've savored it.

He runs his hand down Steve's spine, feeling the knobs of it under his palm. Steve's less skinny now, less starved and boney.

"Don't apologize," Billy says. He wants to call Steve *baby* , but the word dies on the tip of his tongue. "It's not your fault."

After a long second, Steve shifts. "I should get back to work."

But he doesn't move.

His hands slide around to Billy's back. His fingers fan out. His palms press flat. Keeping him close; holding Billy there against him.

He shudders, turns his face, and Billy thinks he feels him press a kiss

to his shoulder.

“I should get back to work,” he repeats. “I shouldn't touch you. I won't want to stop.”

Billy understands the sentiment.

It’s heartbreaking, holding Steve so close, being able to smell him, being able to feel his heat. Billy feels like he’s moments away from shattering -- but it’s like staring at the sun; he just can’t look away, can’t pull himself back.

He’s scared to move, scared to turn his head and press it against Steve’s hair, scared that it’ll break the moment, scared it’ll make Steve pull away first.

So, instead, he says nothing, because Billy’s never been good at words. He just smooths his thumb over Steve’s vertebrae and breathes.

“God,” Steve breathes, like he's shaken, completely, by this moment. “ *God,* I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Billy says, voice low, barely even a whisper. “So goddamn much.”

Finally, Steve pulls back enough to meet his eyes. His glasses are crooked and a little fogged up and Billy *adores* him.

“I should get back to work,” he says, again, but a hand comes up, wedges between them, to cradle Billy’s cheek in his palm.

Billy thinks that if Steve keeps touching him like this, he truly is going to crumble into a thousand little pieces.

But he doesn’t pull away, because he *can’t* .

“Okay,” he says. “Are you gonna be at the quarry tomorrow?”

“No,” Steve says. “I took two weeks off of Marissa’s hands. But--after.”

Billy knows he's going to catch hell with the kids for that, since it is kind of his fault. But. "Okay," he says. "I'll see you around, huh?"

Steve hesitates. Then he drops his hands. Then he steps away, pulling reluctantly from Billy's arms.

"Yeah," Steve says, throat working.

Billy feels cold all over. Like there's a crack running right through him, all the cold air getting in.

"Bye, Steve," Billy says, trying not to feel like he's walking away when he turns, leaving Steve to his space and his work, before he falls apart completely.

"Billy?" Steve calls out before he can get to the end of the aisle, offering a small smile when he turns. "Last night was really nice. Thank you."

Jesus . It nearly splits Billy's heart in two.

Because Billy can't have him, because that *nice night* was something Billy dreamed about for years and then royally fucked up.

"Yeah," Billy says. "It was. Pretty sure I should be thanking you, though."

He can't stay. He can't keep being pulled in every direction all at once. So, he raises a hand and mirrors Steve's smile.

"See ya, King Steve."

And with that, he retreats. To the safety of the humid summer, to the solace of his car and its shitty A/C, to the thrum of the pavement underneath him as he speeds away, windows open and chest tight.

-*-

Billy always forgets about the oppressive heat of Indiana summers.

California's heat is always broken up by the ocean breeze, by the shade of palms and the sound of the waves. It's probably all

psychological, Billy thinks, but that doesn't really stop him from *missing* California again, from missing *home* .

Which is not to say he regrets his decision to stay in Indiana for the summer. He doesn't. It's just *hot* .

And three days in, three days after his talk with Steve, Billy had found himself wanting to crawl out of his skin with boredom.

He'd called his garage, the place he and one of his pals, George, had opened up a couple years back. He tells them that he won't be around for the summer, tells them to suck it up and figure it out -- but only because he knows they can handle it, because he trusts George and his staff -- and also because Billy really needs this. And they know that, too.

Then, he'd pulled his car into Susan's driveway and had offered his hands, wanting to help, wanting to stay busy. The projects had stacked up, had kept him busy. There's still a lot to do, a lot left undone, but after a few days of work, she'd kicked him out, told him to do something else with his time. To relax and enjoy his summer.

But Billy isn't good at staying still. Never has been.

So, when he had gone over to the Byers' in the morning to drop off some brownies Susan had made as one last errand for the day, and Joyce had been cursing up a storm at her car that wouldn't start -- well, Billy had offered up his services.

The hours fly by. Joyce brings him some lemonade. The heat of the day starts to fade as the sun slides from its peak in the sky. When he pushes himself back out from underneath Joyce's well-loved station wagon, it's nearly dusk.

And he's not alone.

He doesn't know exactly when Steve drove up. He didn't hear a car, didn't hear the groan of shoes over gravel.

He doesn't know how long Steve has been standing there, watching him, Will Byers small and lanky at his side.

Steve blinks when he rolls out, and turns a smile at Will. “Go inside, freakshow. I'll be by in just a second.”

Will nods, glancing between them with those always perceptive eyes. Then he's gone.

Billy stretches, arms out and covered in grease.

“I thought you were working today? Is it already that late?” Billy says.

“No,” Steve says, shifting on his feet. “No, today was Marissa’s first day back.”

Billy blinks. “I thought that was tomorrow?”

Something in Steve's shoulders goes easy; Billy hadn't even realized he was tense.

“So you weren't avoiding me?” he asks.

“No?” Billy says, running his and through his hair. “Shit, I didn’t realize what day it was. Could’ve sworn you were still working today.”

Steve holds out his hands. “It's okay if you were-- are. Avoiding me. I get it. It's fine. I-- I'm the one with the hangup making it weird.”

Billy drags a hand down his face -- he can feel the grease on it as it his his cheek. Dammit. He lifts up his shirt from the hem and wipes his face off with a huff.

“I wasn’t. This old clunker wasn’t running this morning, so I figured I’d help out. I’ve been trying to stay busy, and I guess I lost track of the days.”

“Still,” Steve says, watching him. “If you are, that's --”

“ *Steve* ,” Billy says. Firm, but kind. “I’m not.”

Even if it’s probably going to break Billy apart by the end of the summer; it’s worth it.

“Do *you* want space? Because I can give you space, if you want it.”

“No,” Steve says. “No, I don't want -- no.”

He sighs, shuffling forward a step, and he digs out a towel from his bag on his arm. Shuffling forward, he crouches and holds it out for him.

“This would be a hell of a lot easier if we had just been fuck buddies,” Steve says.

Billy takes the towel. It’s damp with quarry water but smells like Steve, so Billy takes it and towels off his face some more, even though he knows it won’t fix the problem. What he needs is a good shower.

“It would be, maybe,” Billy says into the towel, words muffled. “But we kinda messed that one up, so.”

He drops the towel from his face and takes a slug of the lukewarm lemonade left next to him, teetering in a plastic cup from the arcade. It's sweating from the heat. So is Billy.

“I think, for me, it still would’ve been pretty much the same, though.”

“Shut up,” Steve breathes. “Don't say shit like that.”

Billy frowns and fists his hands in the towel. He’s not his dad, but he can’t help how easily frustration bubbles underneath his skin, how easily the anger turns inward.

Of course he’d say something to mess it up, even if it was the truth. Wasn’t Steve supposed to want to *talk* ? That’s what Max said, anyway.

“Okay,” he says, slowly. “I won’t say shit like that.”

“No, that's not --” Steve winces, dropping to his knees next to him, weight settling back on his heels. “Billy, that's not what I mean. I just mean -- *fuck* , I'm really bad at this.”

“To be honest,” Billy says, after a beat, “you’re my only ex I *don’t* talk to. I’m normally better at this.”

But Steve has *always* been the exception to the rule.

“Not me,” Steve says; smiles tight when Billy looks at him. “Granted, I don't have exes like you. Nancy, maybe, but that took a lot of fumbling, too. Until we figured out how to be friends.”

It hurts a little to think that *friends* is what Billy has to aim for, even though he would love something more. Even though he’ll always love Steve as more.

“Look, I’m willing to try and figure it out if you are.”

Steve gives him a look. “I don't wanna be friends, Billy.”

Billy can’t find a response to that, can’t drag up words from the pit that his stomach is. So he just sets the plastic cup down and nods. Once. Short and sharp.

He thought he maybe had a chance for something with Steve, but--

“Max and Dustin came over to my place and read me the riot act. Said I was being a big baby, though not as nicely.” Steve says, still on his knees, looking at him. “Said that I'm stupid, which isn't wrong, and said *this isn't 1986* anymore. Reminded me that I'm not eighteen and I don't have to babysit them anymore. And then reminded me that I probably have more money than I know what to do with.”

Billy nods, slowly. He doesn’t have a goddamn *clue* what Steve is talking about, so he just lets him keep going.

“I don't know what's gonna happen. Or even if it'll work. Or if you even want to anymore.” Steve says. “But the kids are right. And it isn't fair, not to you and not to me, to try and force ourselves into not feeling something when we obviously both still feel it.”

Billy squints at Steve, like he’s trying to see him more clearly, trying to bring him into focus.

“What are you saying?” he asks, unsure. Unable to accept any of the

hope that wants to simmer in his stomach.

“I don't wanna just be your friend, Billy. I don't think I can.” Steve says. “So, we're either nothing-- or we're everything. It just depends on what you want.”

It feels dangerously precarious to hope, to even *think* about it.

“Are you saying --” Billy stops himself, takes a breath. “Steve, you know I can’t stay here. Are you saying you’d --” *leave, with me?* Billy thinks, “be fine with that?” It feels too cautious to hope for something quite so huge.

“I'm saying that if you want, we can try. See if we even still… mesh. You're not the same person you were, and I'm not the same person I was, but…” Steve shrugs a shoulder, clearing his throat. “If you want to try, I want to try. And when the end of the summer comes… we'll figure something out.”

For a moment, Billy wonders if he’s dreaming. If he fell asleep under the car, in the cool shade of it, and found solace in fantasy. But when he blinks, when he takes a breath, it’s all still the same, Steve, staring at him with those gorgeous eyes, waiting for an answer.

“God, yes. Yes, I want to try,” Billy says.

He doesn’t need to try to know that he loves Steve, that he wants him, but he also knows Steve is right: Billy loves the Steve he knew five years ago, the memory of him. He knows -- it won’t be the same.

Steve blinks at him. Blinks at him and then smiles.

“Okay,” Steve says.

“What,” Billy says with a laugh, relief high in his chest. “Did you think I’d say *no* ?”

“Yeah, kind of.” Steve admits.

“After I *kissed* you?”

“And then I freaked out and rejected you, I mean, *yeah* .”

Billy laughs again and tosses the towel back at Steve. “You do know how stupid I am for you, right?”

Flopping back, towel clutched to his chest, Steve huffs out a laugh of his own. “Stupid sounds about right.”

“ *Hey* ,” Billy says, but it’s fond. It’s perfect. “So, are you sticking around the Byers’, or? I’m almost done with the car.”

In all honesty, at this point he’d been fixing stuff that wasn’t even *broken* , just in need of a little TLC. The car’s been up and running for hours.

“Just picking up a baking dish from Joyce, since I was dropping Will off.” Steve says, then tilts his head. “Did you -- did you want to do something?”

“Yeah,” Billy says. “I’d love to.”

Then, he looks down at himself and winces. Taking in the dirt, the grease and the grime.

“I think I’m going to need to detour to my motel. I’m kinda -- grody.”

“That's one word for it,” Steve says, and his eyes are a little darker-- or maybe that's just Billy, coasting on the high. “Did you want to go out somewhere specific? I could always whip something up.”

Billy grins, slow and wide. God, the idea of getting back into Steve’s house sounds like heaven.

“Do you still have that shower of yours? I’ve got a spare set of clothes in my trunk.”

He thought he’d be helping out Susan with a tiling project today, so he’d come prepared. Lucky him.

“Yeah. I updated, in fact.”

“Can I just shower at yours, then? I’m doomed to have shitty showers in Hawkins. The water pressure at the hotel is criminal.” He smiles. “I’ll pay for groceries, if you’re gonna cook.”

“That sounds good,” Steve bobs his head, throat working. “I'll meet you there? Gotta go get that dish.”

“I gotta finish up with this. Gimme a list of groceries and I’ll pick them up on the way?”

“Okay.” Steve says. “It's a date.”

Billy *beams* .

-*-

“I hope you like Italian,” Steve says, after Billy's shown up with the groceries, after he's showered and changed and come back downstairs.

He's got a pot of shells boiling on the stove and a cutting board in front of him. Billy smells basil, fresh cut and roughly chopped, over the tang of whatever sauce Steve has simmering in a pan.

He was only a little disappointed to find Steve already cleaned up from the quarry when he arrived. He'd remembered a number of their showers together, from the simple to the hot and heavy, and after seeing the update Steve had made to his shower -- dark stone and black steal complementing the blue Steve had painted throughout the house -- he'd wished he'd gotten a chance to wash Steve off himself, to press him against the cool wall, to kiss him under the perfect stream of water.

He's not complaining, though. Not with Steve cooking in an old high school gym shirt and worn jeans, hair still a little damp, in a yellow kitchen that holds so many memories and so much promise.

“And cheese,” Steve says, gesturing to the chunks of mozzarella and parmesan before pouring out a glass of wine to match his own.

“It's perfect,” Billy says, grinning. “You're perfect.”

He leans against the counter, eyes on Steve.

Steve glances up from where he's starting to grate the mozzarella, cheeks warm. “Don't start that,” he says, but then he's grinning down

at the pile of cheese.

Billy remembers all the times he told Steve he was perfect, over bunched up sheets, words pressed against Steve's bare skin. It's nice, in a different way, to say it over something as domestic as Steve cooking at the stove.

The wine is good, because of course it is. Not the shit Billy normally drinks because he can't *really* tell the difference, and if it's just him, it doesn't really matter.

"So, you missed me at the quarry?" Billy asks.

Steve pauses, wiping his hands off on a towel. "I brought watermelon. As a peace offering. The kids ate it all."

Billy's stomach twists, but in the good sort of way. In a way that makes him smile, wide and bright. "What, and I'm supposed to *stop* saying you're perfect? Jesus, Steve."

Steve's nose wrinkles up. "Watermelon makes me perfect?"

Billy hums. "It does. Maybe tomorrow we can bring cherries, if you're free to go down to the quarry again."

"Cherries, huh?"

"Can't eat 'em and not think of you," Billy says, taking another sip of his wine. "I still do."

Steve's whole face burns. He watches as Billy sets his glass down, watches as Billy watches him, and then steps close.

Waits. Waits until Billy realizes what he's doing and gives a little jerk of a nod.

And then he presses a kiss to his cheek.

"You're sweet," he says, moving to step back.

Billy's cheeks are burning. He wants more, wants to dip in closer and kiss Steve again, but he doesn't think it'd be right. Not yet. Not after

something so sugary sweet.

“Max is gonna kill you for boosting my ego so much,” Billy says.

Steve grins, delightfully wicked. “Don't tell her, then.”

“What, about *any* of this?” Billy gestures between the two of them. “I think she'd notice something was up.”

“No,” Steve laughs, shuffles over and goes back to prepping dinner. “No secrets. Not this time. I think if it's going to work we'll have to be honest. With the kids. With each other.”

“That sounds so *adult* ,” Billy says. “Way too reasonable.”

He leans against the counter and watches Steve work for a bit, just admiring him.

“I can do that,” Billy says, after a beat. “I *want* to do that.”

Steve glances at him as he stirs solve of the basil into the sauce. “I know you can. You're already ten times better than high school -- no pretending to *show me the ropes* . Not that there are many ropes left to show me.”

“Jesus,” Billy laughs. “I didn't think you'd go for the fact that I had the worst crush on you. It seemed like -- the only option?”

“I didn't mind. And I didn't think it was a lie, at first. Thought maybe you wanted-- god, what did you call yourself? A *safe bet* ?” Steve laughs, eyes wrinkling at the corners as he stirs. “Figured you wanted a safe bet, too. And then you paid Dustin off so I could *sleep* .”

“Yeah,” Billy says, chest feeling a little light. He feels like Steve just *sees* him, just fucking *knows* him. “Yeah, that was kind of showing my hand, wasn't it?”

“Only a bit,” Steve's smile is soft when he gives it, and then he holds out his hand. “Pass me the wine?”

Billy picks up the wine and walks it to Steve, pressing it into his hand. He dips close, leans over Steve's shoulder to peer into the pots

on the stove. “Smells good.”

Steve hums, pouring a healthy amount of wine into the sauce. Doesn't even bother measuring.

“Old recipe,” Steve says. “My nonna-- my mom's mother -- she told me that the only way I'd ever find happiness was to give it. Food is kind of a big thing on my mom's side of the family. Cooking is how you show love.”

Steve's nose wrinkles up at that. He huffs and looks at Billy.

“I always thought it was bullshit, but… it's relaxing. And a nice way to make sure everyone's fed something more than pizza. Easy way to take care of the people you care about, you know?”

Billy leans forward and presses a kiss to Steve's temple, like he's *scared* to kiss him on the lips.

“Jesus, you're something else,” Billy says, because he can't call Steve *perfect* again, even though it's true. “I don't think I deserve to eat this. Hell, I don't deserve the rice krispies treats Joyce gave me for fixing her car.”

Steve twists a little, faces him better, and frowns like he's going to argue. Like he might try and convince Billy he's a good person, say he *does* deserve it.

He doesn't, though. Somehow -- somehow that's *better* .

“What makes you think that?” he asks.

Billy makes a noise, because he doesn’t have words for an answer, doesn’t have a good *reason* other than the fact that he knows he’s not a good person. Sure, he’s better than he was, but that doesn’t make him anything close to a saint.

“Don’t let me distract you, pretty boy. You wouldn’t wanna burn that.”

Steve lets him deflect. Purses his lips and goes back to stirring.

For a while, it's quiet like that. Until Steve is clicking off the burners, until Steve is grabbing a dish towel and using it to pull the pot off of the stove so he can drain the pasta into a colander in the sink.

Steam billows up into his face. He leans against the sink, then turns and crosses his arms.

“Cooking isn't about deserving it,” he finally says, like he's been thinking about *how* to say it. “It's not about if you're… a good person or something. It's about giving. And I'm choosing to give to you. I don't care if you think you deserve it.”

Billy makes another sound, because it’s not like he can really *argue* with Steve on that one.

“Okay,” he says, finally. “But I guess you probably should *know* I’m still... *me* . If we’re gonna -- do this.” It suddenly feels so important for Steve to know, for Steve to have the chance to back out of he wants to. “I’m better than I used to be, and I’m trying -- but I’m still the same person.”

“And who is that?” Steve asks. “Because what I remember, who I remember, is a scared teenage boy, angry at the whole world and just trying to survive. But who was funny and charming when he let himself -- and who was kind enough to buy me some sleep, to distract me when I was scared, and to sacrifice a whole hell of a lot so his little sister didn't have to.”

Billy pauses for a moment, bites his lips. “Max told you that?”

There was never a chance in the world that Billy was going to tell Steve any part of what Max told him. She’d been a kid, she’d been uprooted from her home and had been frustrated, sad, and alone. And Billy had had all the potential in the world to ruin that for her. He doesn’t resent her for it, not in the slightest -- but he does wish that he had handled things better.

But, at this point, his regrets are too numerous to count.

Steve's face softens. “Yes. I don't think she meant to, but she did.”

“What’d she *say* ?”

“That you would have never broken up with me if she hadn't begged you to. That she was scared and you made it better at the cost of your own happiness.” Steve says. “That you did it for her.”

Billy nods. He hadn’t wanted to tell Steve *too much* , just in case.

“To be fair, I was always going to leave. I couldn’t have stayed. It just -- happened sooner than I thought it would.” He huffs out a laugh. “I’d *say* we didn’t *break up* but I think that’d be a lie.”

“I know, Billy.” Steve says. “But my point is, if you're trying to warn me or tell me you're the same guy that did all of those things five years ago, you don't have to. I fell in love with that guy. I don't need a warning.”

Billy nods, once. “Okay.”

He knows he should argue about young love, about infatuation versus actual love -- but he loved Steve too. Still does, if he’s being real honest about it with himself.

“I still think you’re an idiot with bad taste for it,” Billy says, helping Steve get plates down from the cabinets when Steve gestures for them. “But that seems like a you problem.”

Steve hums. “You're right. Guess I'll have to eat this whole dinner by myself, then.”

Billy can’t help himself. He steps forward and tucks Steve into his arms from behind, pressing a kiss just behind his ear. “In your dreams, pretty boy.”

Steve shudders and then laughs, leaning back into him as he serves up the food onto two plates. “Maybe a few of them.”

Billy is quiet for a few beats before he hugs Steve a little tighter and pushes his face against Steve’s hair, against the dip of his neck. “Gotta say, this feels like a dream.”

Steve's hands move to rest over Billy's. It's a light touch, tentative, and then his fingers are lacing between his, palms laying flat and warm over the bones in the backs of Billy’s hands.

He drags Billy's arms tighter around him. Pulls Billy closer, tighter, by wrapping himself up in him. He lets his head rest back against Billy's shoulder, and lets out a breath like it's relief.

“Don't cream your pants,” Steve says.

Billy huffs a laugh out into Steve’s hair. “Yeah, I’ll try not to.”

He pulls his fingers over Steve’s stomach for just a moment, then gently pushes him forward.

“Come on, pretty boy. Let’s eat. Wouldn’t want this all to go to waste, huh?”

They sit at the dining table, all proper, to eat dinner. It tastes just as good as it had smelled, covered in cheese and a rich tomato sauce.

Billy asks him a bit about his grandmother, about what else she taught him to make, and Steve spends half of dinner talking about the weird homemade shit his nonna used to whip up and the recipe box she left him when she passed. With anyone else, Billy might've been bored. But with Steve, with getting to know *more* of Steve, Billy could never be bored.

They finish a bottle of wine between the two of them. Steve pops open another and laughs when Billy tells him he knows fuck all about wine.

“But you *live* in California.” He argues. “Sonoma valley is famous for their wine. How is that even possible?”

Billy's never gotten around to much wine tasting. Steve says he should make a weekend of it sometime.

And as they clear the plates, Billy setting them in the sink as Steve packs up the leftovers, Billy can't help but do what he's done for years. Picturing Steve out on the coast with him. Dragging him to some posh vineyard. Drinking wine with him in the rolling hills and valleys until the sun sets.

“You don't have to wash those,” Steve says, shutting the fridge. “I can take care of it later.”

“You cook, I clean,” Billy says. “I’m pretty sure that’s a universal. Besides, it was too good not to try and do something in return.” Billy carefully sets each dish in the drying rack as he goes. “Thank you. It was -- really nice.”

Steve smiles, leaning against the edge of the counter next to him. “I'm glad. Even if there's supposed to be a rule about not eating Italian or ribs on a first date.”

“What?” Billy laughs, glancing at Steve out of the corner of his eye. “There is? *Why?* ”

“It's messy. You don't want to be covered in tomato or barbecue sauce when you're trying to make a good impression.” Steve says. “You didn't know that rule?”

Billy just raises his eyebrows and laughs again. “Oh, so *that’s* why I never make a good impression. Good to know I can blame it on that, huh?”

“Pretty sure it's just your general demeanor.” Steve says, making a face like he's unimpressed, mouth and nose scrunching, but his eyes are so wonderfully bright.

“Mm. And you’re *still here* ?” Billy tosses a smile at Steve, feeling warm, feeling *happy* . “Well, there’s no accounting for taste.”

Steve lets out a little, forlorn sigh. “My standards are decidedly low. I blame old age.”

“Yeah, because you’re getting *real old* .” Billy looks around the kitchen, around the space Steve has made for himself. Looks at Steve, up and down, approvingly. “Definitely not Hawkins’ most eligible bachelor, or anything.”

Steve snorts. “Yeah, no. *You* may think I'm pretty, but not everyone else does.”

“Pretty sure our waitress was checking you out. I *still* don’t think you see the way people look at you,” Billy says.

“The way people look at me?”

“Yes?” Billy says. “Jesus, you’re hot. People would check you out all the time back in high school. They still do, from the very little I’ve seen. So, quit it with the *not pretty* shit, huh?”

Steve bats his eyes. “Careful with the compliments. I might swoon.”

“Isn’t that, like, the whole point?”

Dropping his head forward, Steve laughs. “I guess if that's what you're after. Compliment away.”

Billy keeps his attention on the dishes for a little while, careful. “Why *wouldn’t* I be after trying to make you swoon?”

“Billy. You don't have to *try* .” Steve says, glancing up at him, face a little pink -- from the wine or the admission, Billy's not sure. “You make me feel like I'm dumb and eighteen again just by *looking* at me. You don't have to pull out a bunch of compliments.”

“Well, I’m not just *saying* them. I’m telling you the truth because I feel like you should hear it. Besides, you’re an idiot for not noticing all the people looking at you.”

Billy’s wine glass is by the sink. He picks it up with soapy hands and takes a long sip before setting it back down again.

Steve watches him for a second. His arms cross loose over his chest.

“Okay,” he says. “I'm pretty, then.”

“There you go,” Billy says, grinning. “And I’m lucky as hell.”

But it’s not just Steve’s looks that make Billy lucky -- it’s all of him. It’s the whole package that Billy doesn’t really deserve in the slightest -- but Steve wants to try this, to *actually* try it, so Billy isn’t about to kick up a fuss.

Steve laughs again, a short breath of a thing. “Sure. I'm pretty. You're lucky. We're a match made in Hawkins, Indiana.”

Billy finishes up the last of the dishes and takes a dishtowel to Steve’s counters and his table, despite Steve’s numerous protests. Then, he

rummages in the freezer for something for dessert.

“You got anything sweet to go with the wine?” Billy asks, mostly just enjoying the cool air wafting from the open freezer.

“Just strawberry ice cream. No rocky road.”

And that's -- Steve remembers his favorite fucking ice cream.

Billy grins, pulling out the strawberry ice cream to set on the counter. “It’s been *five years* ,” Billy says, feeling a little proud, a little enamored. And sure, he remembers *Steve’s* favorite ice cream, but Billy *knows* he’s gone for Steve.

“Don't act so surprised,” Steve says, going for two bowls. “You're a hard guy to forget, Billy Hargrove.”

“I did kind of make myself a name in this place. I mean, hell, I beat up that guy you later slept with *just* because he kept looking at you.” Billy shrugs. “Kinda hard to forget that kinda thing.”

Steve blinks. “ *That's* why you got into a fight with him?”

“I mean, I was having a bad day. I was constantly picking fights back then. So, I’m sure I was looking for a reason.”

“That's --” Steve sputters into a laugh. “Oh, my god, that's so ridiculous. *You're* ridiculous. I can't believe you fought a guy, like, twice your size because you were *jealous* even though we were already fucking around.”

Billy shrugs again.

“Yeah. Well.” He leans back against the counter. “I was jealous, a little, too. Of how out he was, how easy life seemed for him. He didn’t have -- any of the self hatred I had. Or didn’t seem like it, anyway.”

Humming, Steve scoops out ice cream for the both of them. “ *That* makes more sense. And that's why I told you to come to me.”

Billy snorts. “I still think it was kinda stupid for you to trust me with

something like -- that.” Billy can feel the faint blush on his cheeks, the memory still so fresh. Like he could ever even let it *fade* . “Dunno you knew me so well.”

“I've been told I have a small tendency toward self destruction,” Steve says. “But I knew you wouldn't hurt me. Not really. Not after the fourth of July.”

Billy looks at Steve, trying to find an answer on his face, but doesn’t succeed. “What do you mean, after the fourth? I mean, I distracted you, yeah, but --”

“You told me you'd protect me,” Steve says. “I believed you.”

“I wasn’t lying.” Billy takes a step closer. “I still would. But you seem less scared, now. Not sure you need me to.”

“You should see me in the woods at night,” Steve says -- confesses, really-- hands stilling. “I still get scared. But it's not as bad. You were the best anchor I ever had, though.”

Billy nods to the back window. “The light in the back yard isn’t even on.” Which it used to be, all the time. “Besides, how often are you out in the woods at night?”

Steve gives him a look. “You'd be surprised.”

But then he's holding out a bowl to Billy, strawberry ice cream already a little soft. He gestures to the living room with a swing of his head.

“C'mon,” he says, and guides Billy out if the kitchen.

“New couch,” Billy says, eyeing it.

He remembers Steve, high and anxious, pressed against the previous one, pinned under Billy’s weight. He remembers talking for hours, there, remembers long afternoons pressed up against each other.

“It’s nice.”

It’s another reminder that time has passed. Billy isn’t really sure how

he feels about that, still.

Regardless, he sits down next to Steve, gets comfortable and digs in to wine and ice cream, enjoying the way the cold dessert tones down his flush from the wine.

When they're done, bowls discarded for the coffee table and wine glasses empty again, Billy can't help but be *aware* . Painfully aware, now that his hands aren't busy, with how close Steve is. How warm. How his thigh is pressed flush to Billy's, their shoulders bumping.

Steve lets his head rest back against the couch. "You want more wine?"

"I think," Billy says, leaning in a little against Steve's weight. "That *three* bottles would be a little excessive. My tolerance isn't quite what it used to be."

Steve gasps. "What? The keg king? Really?"

Billy laughs, and he can't deny that he is definitely tipsy at this point. He grabs Steve's hand and sets it down on his own stomach, skin warm under the soft fabric of his shirt.

" *This* doesn't need any more keg stands," Billy says, already feeling a little out of breath with Steve's hand on his stomach.

Steve purses his lips, making a contemplative sound, hand sliding over the muscle there -- even with the bit of softness Billy's acquired over the years. He twists a little in his seat, faces him better, and curls his fingers under the hem to get at skin.

The first touch is electric. Makes Billy's breath catch and his heart stall. Steve smoothes his shirt up a bit, tilts his head, all playful consideration.

"I think you could still manage a few before you need to get worried," he says, and Billy's abdomen winds tight under Steve's fingertips.

His heart skips in his chest, thundering against his rib cage. It's *ridiculous* that Steve's touch could wind him up so much, but also

absolutely unsurprising.

Billy can't help it. He pushes forward, gets his hand on Steve's cheek, so goddamn close that their noses brush.

"Please tell me I can kiss you," Billy says. " *Please* ."

Steve shivers, and Billy feels him exhale sharp against his lips. "I've been waiting all night."

In a breath, Billy closes the distance between them and kisses Steve. It's so much better than before, than the rushed way Billy pushed himself into Steve's space and tasted ice cream and felt only hesitation. He moves in close, one hand on Steve's cheek, the other slipping into his hair. Gentle, overwhelmed with feeling.

Steve hand splays at his waist. His fingers curl a little, press into skin, and he braces his other hand at Billy's shoulder. Tips his head and presses more fully to him, a breath of a sound parting his lips.

Billy eats it all up. The sound, the warmth, just opens his mouth and kisses Steve deeper, hungrier, spurred on by the allure of losing himself to the feeling of Steve, to the pull of it all.

There's a tease of Steve's tongue at his lower lip. A hint of teeth. Steve coaxes him into something even deeper. Into the slick slide of tongues and lips. Into the heavy heat of their breath between the lingering press of their mouths.

Steve moans and leans into him. The hand at Billy's shoulder eases up, curving at the juncture of his neck, thumb dragging against the line of his jaw.

Billy doesn't give himself time to think, he just moves. He pushes himself closer, swinging a leg up and over Steve so that he's straddling him on the couch, pushing him down against the overstuffed pillows as he licks into his mouth. Groaning with it, shuddering under the touch of Steve's fingers on his neck; panting, too.

It's ridiculous. They're making out like teenagers and Billy feels hot all over. It's absolutely ridiculous.

But Steve surrenders up to him. Gasping against his lips and going easy. Going warm and soft and perfect beneath him.

There's heat behind it all, but no hurry. It's kind of strange, to not feel the burn of a rush at the back of his skull, no implicit need to get things going before either of them can think twice. Billy can just *enjoy it* , can take his time to get to know Steve. For Steve to get to know him.

" *Billy* ," Steve breathes, between one kiss and the next, hand curving at his nape and ghosting around to his lower back; kissing him long and slow and sweet.

Like this, Steve is far more intoxicating than the wine. Billy drinks him up, pulling away only so that he can mouth at Steve's neck just to hear more of his name dripping sweet over Steve's tongue.

Steve shudders-- *quivers* -- under the attention. Billy can hear the way he sucks in a gasp, breath hot in his ear. He drags his teeth against Steve's pulse and Steve moans, Steve arches.

" *Billy* ," he says again, and then his fingers are curling tighter over the back of his neck. "Billy, wait --"

Billy wants to press forward, to catch Steve's lips in his own again. But he lets Steve's fingers on his neck guide him backward, so he's a few inches back from Steve, looking at him with eyes that feel glazed and dark, looking at Steve's red lips and his wide eyes.

"Yeah, baby?" Billy asks, fingers combing through Steve's hair. Like he just can't stop touching him.

Steve *groans* . Tugs him down and kisses him again, once, chastely-- like he can't help it either.

"We should, um…" Steve clears his throat, eyes heavy and forehead resting to Billy's. "We should slow down."

Billy's head is *spinning* . His breathing's heavy, his heartbeat's out of control.

"We've got all the time in the world, right?" Billy says, kissing Steve

again, quick. “All night.”

He hums and thumbs over Steve’s jawline, still loving the line of it, the angle. Steve leans into it, shuddering out a breath.

“Yeah, uh… yeah, *no* .” Steve says, but his hands smooth careful and soothing over Billy's back -- like he's worried Billy might pull away. “I mean -- I mean, we should slow *way* down.”

And it’s fair, Steve’s hands on him, because Billy *does* kind of jerk away. He can’t help it, the weird twist in his stomach, the confusion. He feels strange and weird, still straddling Steve like this, but Steve’s holding him steady, keeping him from running away.

“I don’t --” he starts, well aware that he’s red, from the wine, from the closeness, from the new flush of embarrassment for not understanding. “What?”

“Well. Two things.” Steve says, lips thinning, and he's red in the face too-- in the ears and down his neck-- avoiding Billy’s gaze. “One: I haven't really… *done* this in a while. Pretty sure the last time I got laid was, like, nine months ago when I took a trip up to Indianapolis. And two: I don't think we should -- I just think we should wait. A bit. Before we hop into bed again. If that's okay.”

Billy startles a little.

“Of course it’s okay.” He’s a little confused, a little knocked sideways, but of course it’s *okay* . “Look, whatever you wanna do. Whatever you’re comfortable with, baby.”

Steve meets his eyes again, sharp, and leans up and kisses the corner of his mouth. “ *Jesus* , I didn't know I missed that.”

“Missed what?” Billy asks, still dizzy, still a little out of breath.

“ *Baby* ,” Steve says, and then pulls back, blushing. “It does ridiculous, *stupid* things to me.”

Billy laughs, the tightness in his chest going a little bit loose. Like maybe he doesn’t have to be so *worried* .

“Good,” he says, fingers still in Steve’s hair. He pauses, then takes a breath. “Look. Going slow isn’t really -- it’s not something I’m used to doing. You’re gonna have to help me out, tell me what pace is good. What’s okay, what’s not okay.”

Steve nods. “It's not that I-- listen, I *want you* , don't doubt that. It's just… we kind of dove head first last time and -- it didn't end so great. So. So, slow. But, um… but kissing. Kissing is good.”

Because Steve says that, Billy dips in for another kiss. Stealing a moment and a breath away from him.

But he pulls back, even if it’s hard. Even if he feels like he’s going to burn up from it.

“Not gonna lie, *baby,”* Billy says, “But it’s real hard to kiss you and not want more. Not that I *can’t* -- just. *Jesus* .”

Billy pushes himself off of Steve’s lap, sits down next to him. It’s a little easier, that way.

Steve twists on the couch and pulls his legs up, half sitting on his hip as he props his head up on a hand, smile crooked. “What? Do I get you hot and bothered?”

“Jesus,” Billy says again. “ *Yes* , Steve. Obviously yes. It doesn't help that I know what it's like, being with you.”

Steve is grinning, but he's blushing too. Brilliant and bright and wonderfully playful.

Steve is totally going to be the death of him.

“Oh? And what's it like? With me?”

“It’s perfect,” Billy says, leaning forward to catch Steve’s lips in his own. “It’s amazing.”

And it’s been years since they fucked, but judging by the easy, perfect way Steve kisses him? Sex would be just as mind blowing. Just as fantastic. Just as absolutely earth-shattering.

Steve's eyes are half lidded and heavy when he pulls back. He leans slightly forward, like he means to chase his mouth, to steal another kiss -- but his lashes flutter as he blinks and pulls back.

“Yeah,” he says. “That sounds about right.”

Billy wishes Steve had kissed him. He longs for it, the phantom press of Steve’s lips on his own.

“Baby, I think you’re gonna drive me crazy,” Billy says.

Steve lets out a breathy moan of a sound as he reaches out and drags Billy close, hands curving along his jaw and guiding him into a saccharine kiss. “You gotta stop calling me that.”

“You gotta stop driving me crazy,” Billy says, out of breath by the time Steve pulls back.

“I'm *not* ,” Steve says, lips trailing against his cheek.

Billy shivers when Steve’s breath ghosts over his cheek, then his ear. He thinks if Steve truly wished it, he could touch Billy in just the right way and Billy would crumble. If he *asked* Billy to fall apart, Billy would.

“You absolutely are,” Billy says. “And I’m totally okay with it.”

-*-

Waking up in Harrington's place is different than before.

The sun, in his new bedroom, hits the bed in a beautiful sliver of light. Billy rolls into it, letting it warm his face as he wakes up. Steve groans from somewhere behind him, a sleepy, soft noise, and tightens his arms around Billy, like he's trying to keep him there. Like he's trying to make sure he doesn't run away.

Which is -- fair.

Billy's track record isn't great. But he's got no intention of going anywhere this morning, other than maybe downstairs to make coffee to bring back to bed, once he actually manages to open his eyes.

Falling asleep tangled with Steve, still a little tipsy from wine, had been nice. Intimate, in a foreign sort of way. Billy doesn't normally make a habit of sleeping with too many people, *especially* when they haven't actually *slept* together. But they had kept things clean, kept it slow -- had kissed and held each other and had gone to bed wrapped up in one another.

And waking up like this? It's incomparable.

Steve tightens his hold, arms against Billy's bare chest.

“Baby,” Billy whispers. “Quit choking me, I'm not going anywhere.”

Steve tucks up closer. A foot snakes between Billy's ankles. Steve face presses into the space between Billy's shoulder blades.

His breath is so deep, so steady, Billy thinks he might still be asleep.

“Quit wiggling, then.” Steve mumbles against his spine, voice a hush of early morning drowsiness.

Billy grumbles. Not because he's grumpy, truly, but because he doesn't really have words this early in the morning. “Quit telling me what to do,” he says, sleepy and soft, hand falling over Steve's arm.

Rubbing his cheek against his back, Steve huffs. “Quit grousing about it.”

Billy hums, savoring it, the closeness, the feeling of Steve's face against his back.

“Quit it. Go back to sleep, baby,” Billy says, fond.

Steve's hands splay out over his chest, his stomach. He curls up that much closer, that much tighter, and lets out a soft breath.

Billy feels the press of his lips, lingering and sweet, to a place between his vertebrae. Feels his arms tighten and then relax -- enough that, if Billy wanted, he could slip right through them.

He doesn't, though.

Instead, he dozes in the sun, in Steve's warmth and the comfort of his embrace. Time oozes by slowly, then quickly, and when Billy blinks awake again, the sun is in a different place and his head is pillowed on Steve's chest.

When he turns to look at Steve, to catch a glimpse of him loose and relaxed in sleep, Billy finds him already awake and looking back at Billy. Steve’s smile is dopey and sweet with sleep, though, like he's barely woken.

He cards his fingers through the mess of curls on the top of his head. “Morning.”

“Hey,” Billy says, then immediately yawns. “Think that's the longest I've slept in months.” His voice is rough with sleep.

“Same,” Steve mutters, trailing a finger along the curve of Billy’s shoulder; idle and soft. “Who knew I just needed a cuddle buddy to fix my rampant insomnia. I should've tried this years ago.”

“Still have trouble sleeping?” Billy asks, palm splaying out over Steve's ribs.

He wants to be jealous of a potential someone else cuddling with Steve, but it's early and he can't. He was the one who left: he doesn't get to feel jealous over everything.

Steve hums and nods. He's completely easy under him, skin still warm with sleep.

“It's way better than it was,” Steve says. “But sometimes I still scream myself awake.”

Billy makes a noise, a little sad, a little sorry. Steve cranes his neck and presses a kiss to his forehead.

“They're just nightmares,” Steve tells him.

“Still,” Billy says.

But he gets it. He has nightmares of his own. He knows he always will.

He wants to ask, about Steve's nightmares, about his monsters. But he doesn't know *how* . Doesn't even know where to start.

“Coffee?” Billy says, stretching a little without getting up. “I can bring it back to bed.”

“That sounds nice,” Steve says, running a hand down Billy’s back.

“Ya gotta quit touching me, though,” Billy says. Steve’s hand is warm and his touch feels *so good* . So steadying, so grounding. “Otherwise I’m never gonna get up.”

“Maybe that was my evil plan all along.” Steve shifts, twisting until he can face Billy properly, curled up on his side and leaning in to drag his nose against Billy's cheek.

Billy grunts, like he’s being *inconvenienced* , like this is the absolute worst. Then, he hoists himself on top of Steve, piling all his weight onto Steve’s torso with a huff. Trapping Steve between Billy’s sleep-warm body and the sheets.

It pushes a laugh out of Steve, and he wiggles, shirt riding up, hands on Billy’s sides. His hair is a mess against the pillows and his eyes are bright.

“You're heavy,” Steve says, but it doesn't sound like a complaint.

Billy just buries his face against Steve’s neck and breathes him in. “Well *yeah* ,” Billy says. “That’s what happens when you get old and fat.”

“Pretty sure you're younger than me,” Steve says, but his voice takes on a breathy note, his head lulling over for him. “And I'd hardly call you *fat* . You still look like you could just throw me over your shoulder and carry me off.”

Billy presses a kiss at the skin that’s been offered up, slow and lazy. Like he’s savoring it.

He hums thoughtfully. “I mean, I could,” he agrees, finally.

He’s still strong, he knows that. Hell, he works at a garage every day

and wrestles parts around and out of stubborn places. But there's nothing quite like facing his high school sweetheart -- if you could call Steve that -- and remembering that he doesn't look perfect, like he used to. Like Steve knew him to be.

A hand slides up his back slow. Steve moves, easy and languid beneath him, arching a little and humming -- seeming to revel in the weight of him pressing down. He curves a palm to cradle the back of Billy's head, turning his face and kissing the curls of his hair.

"Still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Steve mumbles.

"Well," Billy says, a little breathless, "that's just blatantly unfair."

Steve huffs out a laugh against his ear. "How so?"

When Steve breathes out, Billy shivers, goosebumps going all down his spine. "You. Just -- you."

It's so hard to pull away, but he makes himself. Steve wants to take it slow and Billy wants to respect that. Hell, he wants it too -- Steve's got a point.

They jumped headfirst into something five years ago, and he wants to give it an actual *chance* now. Wants to get to know Steve, wants to see how they'll work together. They can't do that if they just start where they left off.

Billy runs his fingertips over Steve's stomach as he pushes himself off the bed, then yawns and stretches. "I'll be back, pretty boy. Don't go anywhere."

"I won't," Steve says, propping himself up onto his elbows and watching him go.

Billy finds the coffee and the mugs and the shiny new Mr. Coffee machine with ease. He putters around while waiting for it to brew.

The kitchen is quiet outside of the hiss of the coffee pot and the rumble of the A/C. There's light coming in the windows, from the doors leading out into the pool, and it fills the house with an easy calm. A hush it didn't have five years ago. A brightness.

When the coffee's done, Billy pours two mugs and takes them upstairs. Steve isn't in bed, but the bathroom door is cracked.

"Coffee's ready," Billy says, at the door. He sets Steve's mug down on the bedside table and sits down on the edge of the bed, cradling his own mug between his palms.

When Steve pokes his head out, he's got a toothbrush in his mouth, and Billy *adores* him. "Jus' a sec."

He's so *stupid* for Steve, so totally gone. It's really worse with every passing minute.

Billy takes a sip of his coffee and tucks his legs up underneath him.

He's got no goddamn idea what he's going to do to fuck this up, but probably *something* .

He hears the faucet run, hears the rustle of a towel, and then Steve is stepping back out in his boxers and his t-shirt. Then Steve is padding over, bare feet on unreasonably soft carpet, and dipping down to steal a soft, sweet kiss.

"Good morning," he says, smile crooked.

"Morning," Billy says.

Steve tastes like toothpaste and Billy tastes like coffee. It should be awful, but he finds himself leaning forward again, stealing another kiss even as Steve pulls back.

Steve hums into it. He takes Billy's face between his hands and kisses his lower lip, the corner of his mouth, his cheek.

"Plans for the day?" he asks, eyes half closed, lips dragging against Billy's jaw. "I think it's supposed to rain. So no quarry."

"No plans," Billy says. "It's not like I've got a job. What about you?"

In Steve's hands, he feels a bit like he's melting, like he's putty, loose and relaxed.

“Could always pick up a shift at the library,” Steve shrugs, pulling back to meet his eyes, thumb dragging against his cheek. “Or I could stay in and watch horrible daytime television and shitty movies. Unless the kids show up. Sometimes they do that.”

“Do you *need* a shift at the library?” Billy asks. He’s got no idea if Steve’s getting paid or if he’s just volunteering his time. “Because if you don’t then I’m going to cast my vote for shitty movies on your couch. Even if the kids come by.”

Even with them, it doesn’t sound half bad.

Steve beams at him. “Put your coffee down.”

Billy leans to the side and does exactly that. When he straightens back up, he raises his eyebrows at Steve, expectant.

“Bossy,” Billy says.

“I have to keep six teenagers in line on a regular basis. It was bound to happen.” Steve says, kneeing up onto the bed, sliding into Billy's lap like he's done it a hundred times before; like he belongs there.

His arms drape heavy over Billy's shoulders. His knees are on either side of his hips. He leans down and kisses him.

It's unfairly perfect.

“So, you and me and some shitty movies.” Steve says, against his lips. “Sounds like a pretty good day.”

Billy smiles into the kiss, contentment overflowing out of him.

“I’ll clear my schedule for you,” Billy says. “How’s that?”

“Perfect,” Steve says.

-*-

“Okay,” Billy says, teeth clenched. “ *Which* way should I have gone?”

He’s making his third U-turn for the night on Indiana backroads,

kicking up gravel, car packed absolutely chock-full of teenagers who *think* they don't smell like weed, who *absolutely* and *unmistakably* do smell like weed.

Max giggles in his passenger seat. "Steve is *way* better at directions than you."

Billy revs his engine. "If you dorks want to go anywhere tonight, you're gonna have to *tell me how to get there* ."

Jesus, it's like they forgot they weren't being carted around by their babysitter or something.

By the time they manage to get out to the field -- which is apparently nearby Hopper's cabin -- Steve's car full of kids has already gotten there, already set up, and has *already* settled in.

"Sorry we're late, Billy got lost!" Max says, striding up to the group to spread out her own blanket to join the patchwork quilt of them on the grass, flopping down to gaze upwards at the stars.

"We're *late* because someone wouldn't give me *directions* ," Billy says, still feeling a little annoyed by the drive, but it's starting to slip away from him the longer he looks at Steve, with his flashlight waving in Billy's direction, like he's trying to guide him in, bring him home.

It's been maybe three weeks. Three weeks since that first date and the day spent curled up critiquing made for TV movies. Three weeks of carting the kids around, even though Mike Wheeler has a car of his own. Of dates and kisses and sinking more and more into the thing growing between him and Steve, nursed carefully with affection and memories and each new piece of each other given, taking root and blossoming in Billy's chest.

"The important part is the journey, not the destination." Dustin pipes up.

"Shut up, Dustin." Lucas huffs and plops down.

Steve clicks off his flashlight when everyone is accounted for, and smiles at Billy in the dark. "Glad you made it."

Billy can barely see him, his eyes still adjusting to the darkness around them.

“Me too,” Billy says, hand finding Steve’s in the dark. “I didn’t bring a blanket. Can I share yours?”

“Ew, *stop* ,” Mike says from somewhere on the ground.

Steve's fingers twine with his. “Would you rather he share *yours* ?”

Mike makes a disgusted sound and Billy tugs Steve into his arms, laughing. “Jesus, how are you so perfect?”

One of the kids fakes a gag.

Steve presses a smile to Billy’s cheek. “C'mon. I'm over here at the end.”

He guides him along in the dark, hand never leaving Billy’s. Even when he tugs him down onto blanket with him.

Once they're all settled, one of the kids flipping through stations on the little radio they brought with them, Steve bumps his shoulder into Billy's.

“I brought pillows,” Steve says.

Billy hums. He sits up a little, then pushes Steve this way and that before settling back down onto the blanket again, head pillowed on Steve’s upper arm and shoulder.

“Why do I need a pillow when I have you?” Billy says, too sweet, too loud.

“Oh my *god* ,” Dustin says.

Steve's shoulders shake as he laughs. “Shut up and enjoy your constellations, shitheads.”

For the first real time tonight, Billy lets his eyes wander upward, toward the sky.

“Holy *shit* ,” he hears himself say.

He’s not normally one to take his eyes off the ground. He’s gotta say, he rarely looks up, rarely appreciates this kinda thing. Maybe it’s just that California is too bright for this shit. Maybe he’s never looked up in Hawkins before, too preoccupied with his own shit. But this?

This is *unreal* . The sky is gorgeous, spattered with stars like a canvas, what can only be the Milky Way stretching bright and wide across the sky.

Steve's arm curls around him, nose tucking into his hair. “Pretty, right?”

Somewhere to Billy’s right, El says: “Bitchin’.”

The kids dissolve into laughter.

Billy doesn’t really get it, but he can’t bring himself to care. The moment is too perfect and Steve is too warm and soft underneath him. Something poppy and static-y hums through the radio, and Billy should hate that too, but he doesn’t. All of his animosity he *thought* he left in Hawkins has faded, worn down by the waves of time.

Billy stares up at the sky, but he reaches out and up, lacing his fingers with Steve’s hand once again. Steve squeezes at his fingers. Billy can feel his smile.

“Lucas!” Dustin hollers. “Star stuff time. Name that constellation.”

“I can't see what you're pointing to.”

“That one.”

“Dustin, I swear to god --”

“ *That one* , dude.”

“Ursa Minor?”

“Sure.”

Lucas sighs. “Ursa Minor is also known as the little bear--”

Billy tunes out a bit, as Lucas keeps talking. Naming constellations as the other kids pick them out.

“They do this every time?” Billy asks.

“Lucas is our space nerd,” Steve says.

Billy laughs and curls in a little closer to Steve. Not because he’s cold, but simply because he *can* . Because he’s not scared anymore, because they don’t have to hide it.

“Which nerd are you, then?” Billy asks Steve, with a squeeze of his hand.

“I'm not a nerd at all, thank you very much.” Steve says, even as Dustin hollers.

“Mom nerd!”

“ *Definitely* the mom nerd,” Max says, in a tone that sounds like she might’ve picked it up from Billy, growing up.

Billy hums. He turns fully, head still on Steve’s arm, but so that he can look at him in the darkness.

“I mean, you *are* a hot mom, so…” Billy says.

“This is actually a nightmare,” Mike says -- then grunts when El smacks his stomach.

“It's sweet.”

Steve is laughing against Billy again. He shakes with it, each time Steve’s chest moves. Billy rolls back over so that he can look back up at the sky, side pressed firm against Steve’s.

“You dorks invited me,” Billy says, even though they absolutely didn’t.

“We absolutely didn’t,” Lucas says, and Billy outright laughs at that,

delighted and even somewhat affectionate.

These kids are total losers, but they're not the worst. Billy even doesn't *really* mind them, when it all comes down to it.

It sounds like Max smacks Lucas, because he squawks and she laughs.

"Dance with me, stalker."

Lucas chokes. "Umm, no."

"I will," Will volunteers.

Max pulls him to his feet under the starlight. He's considerably shorter than her, but it doesn't seem to matter as they go spinning in the grass.

It's cute. Kind of endlessly so, in an affectionate and foreign way to Billy. He hasn't ever really had this kind of thing before, never been a true part of it.

"What," Billy says, a couple songs in. "You're not going to ask *me* to dance, pretty boy?"

"As the mom nerd of the group, I'm afraid I'm cursed with chaperoning and no fun."

"If you're supposed to be chaperoning, why do these kids always smell like cheap weed?" Billy asks.

Steve chokes on a laugh.

"Cuz the last time Dustin tried to smoke the good stuff Steve's got, he got so paranoid he called Hopper." Mike mutters.

Dustin chucks a pillow at him. "Shut *up* , dude."

Steve twists a little. "Billy, did you wanna dance with me?"

"I dunno," Billy says. "Are these kids gonna squawk about it the entire time?"

"Probably."

“Then *obviously* ,” Billy says. He pushes himself up, stands, and offers Steve a hand up.

Steve takes it and lets Billy pull him to his feet. He's smiling, even in the dark Billy can see it, and he pads over the hill barefooted after him.

Billy’s still wearing shoes, so he’s careful. He revels in the little bit of height it gives him on Steve, reverse of normal. Looping an arm around Steve’s waist, he pulls him close, swaying into the rhythm of the song already -- but not too distracted by it to catch Steve in a kiss.

“Gross!” Mike says.

“Stop *looking* , then,” Billy mumbles against Steve’s mouth.

Really, he only kisses Steve a little harder for that. Steve grins into it, making it more teeth than lips, but it's good anyway.

They sway like that, together, to the music. Eventually, El cajoles Mike up, too. Even Dustin and Lucas join in. Until they're all dancing under the stars.

Eventually, Billy tugs Steve back down onto the blanket, wrapping Steve up in his arms. His eyes have gotten somewhat used to the darkness, which is nice, because he can look at Steve in the lowlight and *see* the way he’s smiling, the way he looks loose and relaxed and happy.

“You’re perfect,” Billy murmurs into his ear, kissing his cheek, his temple.

Steve catches his hands, eyes on the kids-- always watching, even now -- and pulls Billy's arms tighter around himself. “I'm not. But thanks for saying it.”

Billy kisses him -- something between chaste and deep, not caring who sees. It’s so different than how it was before that it’s nearly dizzying.

When he pulls back, he feels lightheaded, but whole, and wonders if

Steve has done this with anyone before him, around the kids. If the kids are *used* to seeing two guys like this, two men so close and so affectionate. At their age, or maybe a little younger, Billy would've lashed out in fear.

Leaning back, grin crooked and eyes bright even in the shadows of the dark, Steve kisses his cheek. "This is really nice. I'm usually a wreck when we come out here. El sits by me the whole time."

Billy stretches out next to Steve, pillowing his head on his arm. "Yeah?" he asks. "You know I'll protect you."

"Might need more than your fists," Steve says. "Not that you should need to at all."

"I feel like it's one or the other," Billy says slowly. "Are we talking about monsters in the woods?"

Steve goes a little still. When he speaks, his voice is a hush.

"Has Max told you anything about that?"

Billy squints into the darkness. He glances back at the kids, but they're all dancing, talking, paying Steve and him no mind anymore, now that they're being *too gross* , too couple-y.

"No. Not really. Just that there was *shit going on* that fall." He keeps his voice low, too. Like they're telling secrets, or whispering sweet nothings.

"That's one way to put it," Steve sighs. "Yes. I'm talking about the monsters in the woods."

"I never knew exactly what you were talking about. How to *take* that," Billy says, soft. Careful.

"It's…" Steve's brows draw together and he sighs again. "It's a *really* long story."

"Sometime, then?" Billy asks, cautious. He leans in to kiss the corner of Steve's lips. "Not now, but some other time?"

Steve looks at him and nods. “I promise.”

“Thank you,” Billy says, with the tinny, static-y sound of Madonna somewhere in the background, along with the crickets and the sound of grass in the wind.

Steve's smile goes a bit dry. “Don't thank me just yet. You haven't seen them.”

“Are you actually going to show me monsters?” Billy asks, eyebrows raised.

“Last time --” Steve's breath stalls, and then comes back measured. “Last time, Jonathan took pictures. Just in case. Hop has this file… I'll talk to him. Get a copy. So you can understand.”

Suddenly, it all feels so real. Billy hadn’t *not* believed Steve before -- but there had been an element of unreality to it. Like Steve was talking about some kind of parallel universe where there *were* monsters, but Billy didn’t live in *that* universe. He lived in the one where the only monsters were people like Neil Hargrove, like so many others that Billy knew lurked in the shadows.

“Okay,” Billy says. “You’ll show me, and I’ll still protect you, baby.”

Steve searches his face, as if he's looking for a lie or any hesitation. Carefully, slowly, he says: “Okay.”

Billy presses another kiss to Steve’s lips. Quick and chaste. “Now. Come on, aren’t you gonna point at the sky and tell me the reasons you like me are, like, more numerous than all the stars, or some shit?”

“Are you trying to imply I'm the romantic in this relationship?”

“Well, it's definitely not *me* ,” Billy says, knowing truly and absolutely that it's a lie. A blatant one.

“Right,” Steve drolls slow. “Because you don't bring me coffee every time you stay over --” which is so often that Billy’s tempted to just temporarily move into Steve's, instead of crashing at Susan's since he's stopped blowing money at the motel -- “or kiss me awake or

anything.”

“Or make you breakfast in bed, don't forget about that,” Billy says, leaning in to steal a kiss. He hums and then narrows his eyes. “Jesus, I spoil you rotten.” But when Steve levels him a look through the darkness, Billy just huffs out a laugh. “Okay, okay. I'm the romantic one.”

It's not at all a surprise. All Billy has ever wanted was Steve Harrington. He didn't cherish him right when they'd been together, or close to it, but now he actually has the chance to show it.

Steve laughs as he brings Billy’s hand to his mouth. He takes his time, ghosting his lips against the backs of his knuckles.

“I don't mind,” Steve says. “I've never really been doted on before.”

“Then, I'm happy to dote,” Billy says.

He's never been the type to do this either, to shower someone in affection like this. But he wants to. Hell, he's been doing it without even realizing it anyway.

Billy breathes out, Steve's lips over his fingers, his knuckles. It's so soft, so tender, he's not entirely sure what to *do* with that kind of touch.

Steve presses kisses to his palm. His lips linger on the heel.

“You coming over tonight?”

“Figured I would, if you asked. Don't wanna get in your hair *too much* .” He hooks his foot over Steve's ankle. “Don't want you getting sick of me.”

“Impossible,” Steve says, kissing the heart of his palm. “Come over.”

So, Billy does.

They watch the stars until it gets a little chilly, until the kids are yawning and Billy’s back hurts from lying on the ground. He and Steve drive the kids home, peeling off in separate ways, headlights

disappearing in the rearview, only to meet back up again later, when it's truly dark, when Billy is truly tired.

He lets himself into Steve's house and finds him half upright on the couch -- like he'd been waiting up for Billy, but sleep got the better of him.

Billy picks him up, one arm under his knees, the other under his arms, and carries him up the stairs. Steve is soft in his worn-thin sweats and he smells like grass and night air when he presses himself up against Billy's neck, sleepy and loose. Billy doesn't even get a chance to change out of his jeans -- he sets Steve down on the bed and crowds in after him, unable to keep away from the allure of Steve's skin and the pull of sleep.

-*-

It's not that Billy really planned on spending his Thursday with Max and El -- but it happens anyway. He'd been re-laying some stones on Susan's back patio when El had come over to hang out with Max, and the two of them had decided that watching Billy work was the epitome of a good time. Without, of course, offering to pitch in.

But they brought him lemonade and kept him company and didn't mess with his music, so.

When he's done, he flops down in the grass next to them with a groan, face pillowed in the crook of his arm.

"Wow," Billy says, a little while later. "Thanks a *bunch* for helping, that really made the whole thing much faster."

But he's not mad. He appreciated the company, the amusement of not being alone.

"That's what we're here for," Max pats a sweaty shoulder, nose scrunching up. "Moral support is important."

"Had to make sure the job was done right, too, huh?" Billy says. He steals some of Max's lemonade since his is all gone, ice still clinking around in her glass.

“Yes,” El says. From what Billy’s seen, she seems like a very serious kid.

Max nudges into her side, and they share a smile. “Surprised you're not shadowing your boyfriend instead.”

“He’s working today,” Billy says.

He doesn’t bother to correct her on the *boyfriend* part -- it’s not like Steve and he have necessarily *talked* about what to call each other. They agreed to try things out, to see if they get along in terms of a relationship. But it’s not incorrect, either -- but it reminds Billy that he’s been meaning to ask Steve about it, to press a kiss to his lips and ask if that’s what he wants.

The afternoon sun is sinking. Billy wonders if Steve is home, yet.

“How's that going, by the way?” Max asks. “You and Steve?”

“It’s good,” Billy says, with a stupid sigh that escapes all on its own. “It’s real good.”

Max laughs at him. El goes a bit pink.

“What's that called?” Max asks. “The honeymoon phase?”

Billy swats at her with a dirty hand. “Shove it, punk. We’re just happy.”

El frowns. “But they aren't married.”

“Turn of phrase, Janey.” Max says, slinging an arm around her, but she eyes Billy. “You guys coming to the field on the fourth?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” he says with a grin. “Maybe we’ll actually watch the fireworks this time.”

Max stares at him for a moment and then makes a face. “Gross. I don’t know *what* you were doing last time, but -- gross, Billy.”

He just *beams* .

She pulls up some grass and throws it at him. “ *So* gross.”

He picks up some more with a vicious pull and throws it, dirt and all. Laughing, delighted.

“Susan’s gonna kill you for destroying her lawn,” Max warns, dirt in her hair.

Suddenly, a chunk of dirt and grass whips around and hits Billy in the back of the head. “What the *hell* ?’

El *cackles* .

Max turns wide eyes on her. “ *El* .”

El blinks. “What? He knows.”

Max practically chokes, gaze flying to Billy. “You *know* ?”

“I don’t know?” he says, confused, eyes turning to El. “What the hell do I know?”

“About the demogorgons. Steve told you.” El says. “Which means you can know about me.”

“I don’t know what that -- the *what* ?” he asks, forehead furrowing. “-- wait, the monsters?”

El nods. “The monsters.”

“What about *you* ,” Billy asks, frowning, trying to connect all the dots in his head.

Lips pursing, El gives a little jerk of her head. Her eyes lock on to the glass of lemonade and it comes, floating, in the air.

Okay. He definitely didn’t know *that* .

“ *Oh* ,” Billy breathes out, eyes drifting from the glass, back to El, and back to the glass again. “Okay,” he says, slow. Unsure.

“The lab,” El says. “That's where the monsters are from. That's where I'm from.”

And Billy remembers Steve being pissed about Billy leaving the kids there by themselves...

He feels a little cold, despite the heat of the summer sun. Despite his muscles still aching from the work. Still, he gets goosebumps running down his spine.

“Jesus,” he says, because he’s not really sure what *else* he’s supposed to say. That doesn’t stop him from going, “And you go *back* there?”

“To double check.”

Max clears her throat. “We go to make sure it's safe. Usually -- usually Steve goes. Or Hopper. But we go alone sometimes, too. Without them knowing.”

Billy shuts his eyes, watches the way light dances over the crimson behind his eyelids. He squeezes them tight, sees black, then spots. “*That’s* why he was pissed you fuckers made me drive you there.”

“Yeah,” Max says, shrinking on herself. “I'm sorry.”

Billy gets it now. He *understands* why Steve was so worked up over it, why he would occasionally bring it up and then drop it again. All Billy had known was that he shouldn’t do it again -- but not why.

Now, it seems way more important than just knowing it’ll upset Steve. Hell, now *Billy’s* worried about them doing the exact same thing.

Believing Steve that monsters exist, in some form or fashion, is much easier than this.

Billy just groans and lays down, eyes toward the sky. “You guys are all idiots.”

“El was with us,” Max says, like her friend with brain powers makes it okay.

Billy is quiet for a moment, then he pushes himself back up, trying to school his face into something stern, but not angry. It’s hard; he doesn’t exactly have anything to model it on. The last thing he wants

to do is look like his father.

“You do realize I give a shit if you’re hurt or whatever, right?” he says. “Like, this isn’t a game. If there’s *monsters* -- Jesus Christ -- out there...”

Max’s face hardens. “You don't think we know that? People have died. We *know* .”

“Okay,” Billy says, but it’s not like he’s backing down. “And, what, you want me to *not* give a shit? To just blindly trust you? Do you *know* how stupid I was at your age?”

“Oh, I remember.” Max says, shoulders tight. “And you'd be a hypocrite if you tried to tell us to stop. Just like Steve is a hypocrite for getting mad when we go there alone. He used to do it all the time.”

And that *also* makes Billy mad. Because Steve is *totally* the kind of person to go wandering around looking for trouble.

He grumbles and crosses his arms. “I don’t know why you’re upset that I care, Max.”

“I'm--” Max sighs and looks at El; she shrugs, a bit helplessly. “I'm not upset you care. I just don't appreciate the way everyone thinks we can't handle ourselves. It's like… it's okay if they risk themselves, but not us.”

And yeah, okay, that’s -- fair. Because Billy *would* probably risk himself before the kids, and he’d definitely risk himself before Steve. But still, that’s -- he doesn’t really have *words* for it, exactly.

“Look. It’s not that I don’t think that you can handle yourself. But shit happens. And I’m going to worry about it. And because I’m your *brother* , I’m going to want to do what I can to protect you, alright? That’s just sort of how that shit works, Max.” He runs a hand through his hair, which is still damp with sweat. “I know that I haven’t been around, that I’ve got a kind of shitty track record, but -- I’m trying.”

Max's face softens. “I know. It's just… frustrating. Especially when one of our friends gets hurt-- and then we're expected to hang back

and wait it out until everything's okay again."

Billy clenches his teeth, his mind connecting that last, pesky dot.

"Steve's scars," he says, a little quiet, a little hesitant. Like, if he hopes hard enough, maybe it won't be true. "You're talking about the scars on Steve's neck."

It's a question, but he refuses to ask, because he already knows.

Max nods slow. "Steve's scars. He was -- I mean he was barely older than us now, Billy. And Lucas has a limp when it gets too cold because he broke his leg. And Will can still see stuff sometimes. And Hopper had a chunk practically taken out if his calf. People died. I mean -- we can't just sit around when we could be helping. So we check on it sometimes. To make sure there's nothing there. Is that so bad?"

Clearly, this whole thing is *way* more dangerous than Steve let on. It's goddamn serious, and the reality of it is now just hitting him, sinking deep and cold into his stomach. It feels a lot like fear, because this isn't some kid's nightmare -- he's seen the repercussions of it, now. Seen that scar on Steve's back, just like how he knows Steve is still sometimes scared of the dark.

Billy is quiet for a moment, before he talks. "I don't have to like it."

Because he would. Because he knows why they all would jump in front of danger for each other: because they care. Steve would push himself in front of those kids, would go someplace he shouldn't, just so they wouldn't get hurt. And the kids would sneak away to do the same. And Billy knows he'd step in front of Steve to take a hit instead of him, to sacrifice himself. And hell, he'd do the same for Max. For the kids.

He gets it. Even if he's never seen it.

Max gives him a little smile, shares a look with El, and nods. "You don't have to like it."

Then, he grabs her, and gives her a noogie, because he *can.* Because he wants a hug and he's not going to *ask* for one. "And if you try and

go without me again, I'm gonna kill you myself."

She squeaks, batting at him with her hands, hair a mess. "You're the *worst* !"

But she's laughing. She's laughing and she's safe. And Billy's content with that.

-*-

Billy doesn't even give himself a chance to shower, to change. Once Max and El head out, Billy jumps into the Camaro and guns it for Steve's.

Alone, it all hits him again. Hard.

He drives faster than he should, feeling a little bit like he's back in the past, tearing down the small streets of Hawkins, trying to outrun his own emotions, his own fate. It's a little like that, except this time he's running toward them, facing them head on.

Steve's car is in his driveway, which is good. It's comforting. The sight of it alleviates a little bit of the anxiety growing in Billy's gut.

He pounds on the door, instead of letting himself in, because he doesn't *want* to tear the house apart for Steve, doesn't want to make the feeling *worse* by having to chase him like he's something lost.

Steve answers the door with a frown, brows pinched, still in his pressed shirt and khakis from the library -- but alive and well and standing in front of Billy without a hair amiss. "Billy? What's wrong --?"

Billy doesn't say anything, just crowds Steve into his arms and tucks his face into his neck. He holds Steve tight, like he could slip away at any moment, breathing him in, cherishing his warmth.

To hell with the telekinetic girl -- Billy's more concerned about monsters. About *Steve* running head first into monsters, because he's an *idiot* , because he cares way too much.

It takes Billy way too long, face pressed against Steve's neck, to

realize that he’s *scared* .

But Steve -- perfect, sweet, caring Steve -- doesn't even ask. He just wraps him up and holds him close. Lets Billy burrow in deeper. Strokes down over his back.

He lets Billy cling to him, there, in the doorway. Lets him hold on and breathe him in for as long as he needs. Infinitely patient.

“You are an *idiot* ,” Billy says, against Steve’s neck, after a long time.

The door is still open, sounds of outside pouring into Steve’s house. Billy can hear music going from the other room. He can hear Steve breathing, calm and steady.

“What did I do?” Steve asks, but it's soft -- not defensive; he keeps stroking down Billy’s back.

Billy doesn’t even know what he’s supposed to say.

Eventually, he settles with, “The fucking *monsters* , Steve.” And holds him even tighter.

Steve stills for a moment, a second, and then he nods. “Okay. Let’s go inside and talk about how much of an idiot I am.”

“We kind of are inside,” Billy says petulantly, but he pulls back a bit and shuffles them forward, closing the door behind him.

He keeps an arm around Steve, though, holding him close to his side. Steve lets him do that, too.

Carefully, he guides them both to the living room. He's got The Stones playing somewhere. Billy wonders if he was about to start dinner. He usually plays The Stones when he's cooking.

They sit down on the couch together. When they're settled, Steve kisses Billy’s cheek and takes his face between his hands to meet his eyes.

“I guess it's time to have that talk, huh?”

It’s not that Billy’s angry, but he *is* scared. And he *is* exhausted. And he feels a little bit like he’s been lied to by everyone around him.

Steve said there were monsters, but he never said he was endlessly *stupid* about it.

A part of Billy had hoped -- well, not that Steve was *lying* , but -- that the whole thing hadn’t been true. That monsters didn’t exist. That none of it was real. That there was no reason to be scared.

Billy grunts and pulls Steve into another hug.

“Where do you want me to start?” Steve asks, kissing his temple, fingers dragging through his hair.

“I dunno,” Billy says, fingers over Steve's spine. Feeling his chest expand as he breathes, alive. “The beginning?”

Steve breathes out slow and then says: “Okay.”

He starts with the Byers’ house. With Nancy and Jonathan and flashing lights. With a monster too large for Billy to fathom, with a face Steve can't quite bring himself to describe. With fire and hope.

He tells him about how it was the same monster that took Barb. How it was the same monster that took Will. That it started long before Billy had even heard of Hawkins, Indiana.

“There was a period where I thought it was over. That it was in the past.” Steve says, and Billy’s still holding him. “But the Gate, the door to whatever world they're from, was still open. And it infected the town. And then I was hunting monsters with your sister, with Dustin, with Lucas.”

Steve tells him about that night, so long ago, and the tunnels. About praying that, if they got him, they wouldn't get Dustin. About El closing the Gate.

About knowing, *fearing* , that it would open again.

He lets Billy hold him the entire time.

“I kind of obsessed about it. Gave me something to do, when I wasn't working for my dad, and I was convinced it wasn't the end of it.” Steve says, sighs, and then shrugs. “And I was right.”

“And then you pulled a *stupid* stunt and nearly got yourself killed?” Billy asks.

“Yeah, well.” Steve clears his throat, gaze straying. “For a while, I was… not in a great place. I went looking for it. To prove I was right or because I was scared or because I couldn't let it rest -- I don't know. But I went looking and I found it and… and I got really lucky. Lucky that El likes to snoop, to keep tabs, and they found me in the tunnels and… it just wasn't-- wasn't pretty.”

Billy pulls him into a tight hug again, face at Steve’s neck. Where that scar is, underneath the fabric of his shirt.

“Fuck,” Billy says, because there isn’t really anything *else* to say about it.

He can’t tell Steve not to do it, because he *knows* Steve won’t listen, knows that wouldn’t get him to stay out of danger. Even as much as he wants to.

“We're pretty sure it's closed for good,” Steve mutters. “But we can't ever be totally sure. It's why we check. It's why I couldn't -- it's why I couldn't leave.”

“Oh,” Billy says. And yeah, that makes sense. He wouldn’t want to leave, either. “How are you sure?”

“I'm not,” Steve admits. “But El is. And she's the one who opened it. And Will is usually pretty good at sensing *disturbances in the force.”*

Steve says it like he's quoting someone who quoted that. Dustin, probably.

“Okay,” Billy says, pulling back a bit. “Okay. There are monsters, there’s a telekinetic girl, and my boyfriend’s an *idiot* .” Billy pauses and makes a face. And this isn’t exactly how he wanted to talk about it, but. “I guess -- can I call you that? We haven’t really talked about it.”

Steve blinks at him. “Yeah. Yeah, of course you can call me that.”

“I mean, we never talked about it. So.” Billy shrugs.

It feels like kind of a big deal, but maybe, to Steve, it's not.

“Yeah, no, you're --” Steve burns a little, under his gaze. “I guess I just assumed it was a given. I've kind of already told my mom about you.”

Billy flushes, a little derailed from his earlier scare. “What? You told your mom about *me* ?”

“Well, yeah.” Steve shrugs. “She asked about my love life -- which she kind of always does -- and I told her I was seeing someone. And considering I'm not seeing anyone outside of you, I think it's pretty safe to say you’re my boyfriend.”

“Okay,” Billy says, leaning in for a kiss. When he pulls back, he says: “Well, in that case, can my boyfriend stop being an *idiot* ?”

Steve winces. “No promises.”

Billy reaches out, gets his hands in Steve’s hair, threads his fingers through it. “I care, okay? I give a shit about you. I *worry* about you.”

Steve shudders and closes his eyes. Billy thinks he's the only person that touches Steve like this. Like maybe, even back then, Steve was touch starved and hungry and doesn't know how to ask for it -- but he revels when it's freely given.

Steve's hands find Billy’s shirt and bunch up in the material. He presses forward until their foreheads rest together.

“I know. But I just --” Steve lets out a sharp little breath. “I have something I need to show you. Maybe then -- maybe then you'll understand.”

“Alright,” Billy says, pulling back so that Steve can get up. Finally able to let go.

Steve disappears, around a corner and up the stairs. Billy hates the

pit that churns in his stomach just with Steve out of sight, but he knows it's just the shock of it all. That it'll wear off.

When Steve comes back, he's got a file clutched in hand. He looks hesitant in the archway between the foyer and the living room, fingers tight at the edges.

“It isn't pretty,” Steve says. “And you have to swear you won't tell anyone.”

Billy looks at Steve like he’s crazy. “You know they’d fucking institutionalize me for that kind of shit, right? I’m not that dumb.” But he nods then, after a beat, face going serious. “You know I won’t. I promise.”

Billy doesn’t really need pictures. He’s seen Steve's scar. Seen his fear, even years later.

Steve nods and pads over, setting the file down onto the coffee table and then sitting back.

Billy takes it, opens it, looks at it -- really takes his *time* with it -- and then sets it back down again.

Static rings in his ears. His thoughts, for a long beat, are so full that they're blank.

Eventually, he hears himself say: “What the *fuck?”*

The pictures, while mostly composed of the dead bodies of whatever HP Lovecraftian nightmare they were, had filled Billy with a sense of complete and acute dread. The smaller ones, canine in nature, had been bad enough. Then he'd seen the big one -- all gangly limbs, pale skin, and teeth. The folds of its face had been unfurled and splayed open, making it look like a macabre mockery of a flower.

And then -- then he'd seen the clinical, observational picture of someone's leg. Their calf bruised and blood clotted, but dark and angry and stitched in multiple places. Then he'd seen what Billy knows is Steve's back, shoulder, and neck. And it had been so much worse -- so much *worse* -- than Billy could have imagined.

On the couch, Steve has his feet tucked under him. His fingers twitch in his lap.

“Yeah, I said something like that too when I first saw them.” Steve says, a tight grin on his face.

After a moment of silence, Billy picks up the photos and looks at them again, a little harder this time. He studies them, eyes on all those teeth. The sheer goddamn number of them. Jesus. *This* is what’s been scaring Steve all these years.

They’re horrifying enough that Billy’s sure he’s going to see them in his own nightmares. And he’s never even seen them in real life. Hopes to god he never will.

Billy drops the pictures on the table and pulls Steve back into a hug. It earns him a huff of a breath, short and sharp in his ear.

“If you intend to stay tonight, just be aware it won't be restful.” Steve says. “Talking about it, seeing them -- tends to freak me out for a while.”

“What, you think I’m going to *leave you alone* ?” Billy says, lips against Steve’s neck. “I mean, unless you *want* to be alone, but…”

“No,” Steve breathes, hands smoothing up Billy’s back, pulling him closer. “No, I don't want to be alone.”

“Then I won’t leave you alone.”

-*-

They end up ordering takeout. Billy doesn't really want to let Steve out of his sight, but he also doesn't want to seem like he's hovering.

Steve breaks out the expensive whiskey, and they drink it over slices of meat lover's pizza until they finish half the bottle between the two of them. Steve has the shakes and he leaves a few extra lights on -- including the ones out by the pool -- and Billy can't help but feel a little guilty about that.

The file has long since been stored away upstairs in Steve's desk.

But Steve is pressed up to him, head lulled against Billy's shoulder, and he traces the lines in Billy's palm where he has his hand cradled in his lap. On the TV, *Cheers* is playing, even though Billy hates it. It drowns out the noise in his head.

"After I got hurt," Steve tells him, sometime around midnight, when Billy is in a half-doze, still curled up on the couch with him, and Billy thinks Steve thinks he's asleep. "Hopper tried to make me see someone. I wouldn't, at first, so he told me off. Told me I couldn't help if I was just going to try to get myself killed."

Steve sighs, turns his head, and presses a kiss to Billy's shoulder. He smooths his thumb over the heel of Billy's palm, presses a little, like he's trying to work the tension out.

"I told him I wasn't trying to get myself killed. He benched me anyway." Steve says, confesses, to the quiet hum of the TV. "I think he did that because he knew I was lying, even when I didn't. Didn't realize it until I took some time off, went down to my parents' beach house in Florida, stayed a couple of months. Not until I did a lot of stupid shit down there by myself."

" *Baby* ," Billy murmurs, turning his head to press his lips to Steve's hair.

It breaks his heart a little to think Steve had to go through all this alone. When he didn't have to. When Billy had been there, and had *left* .

Steve's fingers ghost so gently over Billy's palm, and then they dig in to the muscle. Perfect counterpoints to each other. It makes Billy shudder, though it doesn't do anything for the guilt riding high in his stomach.

"I'm sorry," Billy says, though an apology means so little, now. It doesn't fix anything.

"It's not your fault," Steve turns to look at him, cants his head over, kisses him slow. "Nothing to apologize for. Never was. I've told you that."

Billy pulls back, frowning. “I shouldn't have left you.”

He could have made it work.

“You couldn't have stayed,” Steve says. “I know that. You know that. I don't blame you for it.”

Billy runs his free hand through his hair. “I could've figured something out.” He sighs. “I know hindsight is twenty-twenty and all, but *fuck.”*

“ But you're happy,” Steve says. “California made you happy. Gave you a chance to grow. You wouldn't have done that here.”

“Yeah, but --” Billy says, starting, then stopping. He can’t argue with that. Staying may have been best for Steve, but it wouldn’t have been best for Billy. Steve would’ve been stuck with the version of Billy who was being eaten alive by rage from the inside, the version who was unstable, who was dangerous to be around. And while they could’ve made it work, it wouldn’t have been best.

It wouldn’t have been *sustainable* .

Eventually, they would’ve crashed and burned, because of Billy.

It doesn’t really make the guilt *go away* , but it does mute it a bit. Makes it fade into a blurry grey in the background of his thoughts.

“Yeah,” Billy says, eventually. “I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am.” Steve says, threading their fingers together. “You couldn't have stopped me, anyway. I would've gone down there if you'd stayed or not.”

“Maybe I would’ve come with you, huh?”

Billy tugs their hands up and presses his lips to Steve’s fingers.

“No,” Steve says, quick and sharp and firm, something in his eyes unyielding. “No, I wouldn't ever have told you. Wouldn't have let you. Still wouldn't.”

Billy frowns. “Yeah, that’s not gonna happen. You think I’m going to let you just -- march off to fight fucking *monsters* while I wait patiently for you to come back? Absolutely not.”

“You shouldn't even know about them,” Steve says, pulling back a bit, and he rubs a hand over his eyes. “Just knowing is dangerous. I'm not dragging you any deeper than you already are.”

“If you think I wouldn’t have figured it out somehow, pretty boy, you’re absolutely wrong. I would’ve followed you, if I had to.”

Billy can’t help the flare of anger in his gut, the annoyance that Steve would put himself in harm’s way so easily. That he’d sacrifice himself like this. That he doesn’t see that Billy has got his back.

It doesn’t just make him angry -- it kind of hurts, too.

“Billy, it's one thing to say you'll protect me, and it's another thing for me to let you.” Steve says. “I wouldn't ever ask that of you.”

Billy clenches his teeth together. “You don’t have to *ask* . It’s not a question of *letting* . I *want* to. You can’t just -- expect me to be fine with you marching off into danger and having no ability to help.”

“I *expect you* to stay out of it and stay *safe* , if it ever comes down to it.” Steve says, voice raising to that sharp tone Billy’s only ever heard him use on the kids.

And yeah, that’s not happening.

Billy narrows his eyes and straightens up, shoulders squaring. He’s never much been one for *authority* . He can’t say that he likes it coming from Steve, not like this.

“Yeah? And why’s it okay for *you* to ask *me* to stay safe and not for *me* to ask *you* to stay safe?”

“ *Because* ,” Steve shoves to his feet, shoves away from Billy, stands with agitated lines, all static. “Because I know what they're capable of and you don't and if you got *hurt* because of *me* I couldn't *stand it* .”

Steve’s all electric, but Billy’s just molten heat, frustration and anger

and something like hurt simmering in his gut. He knows better than to stand, to face Steve like a fight, even though he desperately *wants* to, because confrontation like that comes so naturally to him. So he tightens up and forces himself to stay on the couch, perched on the edge like he's just barely keeping himself there.

"And *what* ," Billy says, "am I supposed to do if *you* get hurt? Huh? What if I could've helped, but just stayed at home on my ass, waiting for you to come back?"

And Billy, he boils.

"Well, come August, it won't *matter* , will it?" Steve snaps, and then blinks, jerking like a puppet, like he hadn't meant to say that.

All the breath goes out of Billy at once. He clenches his teeth together, jaw tight, fists balled at his sides.

Moments ago, Steve was touching his hand. Moments ago, they were so close he could feel Steve's heartbeat. Moments ago, he was happy. Now, he feels like he's fever hot, burning up inside.

"So, what, you're just waiting around for me to leave? I thought --" but Billy bites down on the brittle words in his mouth, teeth snapping shut like a dog's.

He thought they were going to try and figure this out together.

He thought they were going to try and make this last.

"No. *No* , that's not what I--" Steve cuts himself off, and when he presses a hand over his eyes, Billy can see it shaking; when Steve speaks he can hear the strain, the way it wavers, the way his throat must be tight. "I'm not just waiting for you to leave. I *promise* , I'm not just waiting for you to leave."

" *Yeah* ," Billy says, and he can't help the way his voice drips with sarcasm, all the hurt and fear rising up to the surface. "Sure sounds like it."

"Billy --" Steve falters forward a step, like he's going to reach for him, to sit next to him again -- and Billy's skin itches for his touch -- but

he stops and holds his hands out to his sides. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it -- I don't mean *that* . I'm just -- I'm just tired and talking about that shit just -- it just --”

Steve's breath rushes out of him. He stares at Billy, for a long second, and then moves.

He doesn't take the space next to him.

Instead, he slides to his knees between Billy's legs, on the floor. He curls his hands, careful, over Billy's calves. He bows his head, rests it against the inside of one of Billy's knees, and lets out another breath.

“It doesn't matter what it does. It's not an excuse. I'm sorry.” Steve says. “I didn't mean it like that.”

The loudest part of Billy wants to flinch away, to not reach out. To keep his hands to himself. Still, he curls his fingers over Steve’s shoulder, bridging the gap.

“I know I’m not -- I know I don’t have a good track record,” Billy starts. “I know I haven’t been here, and when I *was* here, before, I wasn’t -- the best. I didn’t do a good job showing that I cared. But I’m *here* now.” Billy squeezes Steve’s shoulder, like he’s reminding him. “Everyone seems to think I don’t give a shit, that I’m just going to sit back and --” he swallows.

It’s not that he’s concerned about them getting hurt. He *is* -- but it’s not that. It’s worse than that.

It’s that they could die. They could die, and they expect Billy to do nothing.

-- They think he’s just going to sit back and wait for them to die.

And yeah, sure, Billy left. Maybe he doesn’t have a right to feel this way, maybe he doesn’t have a license. But shit like that’s never stopped Billy before.

“What *did* you mean, if you didn't mean it like that?” Billy then asks, because he has to know.

For a long second, Steve doesn't reply. Just keeps his face pressed to Billy's knee and breathes.

“I'm scared,” Steve finally says, words a hush, fingers curling into his jeans. “I'm scared I'll wake up one of these days and you'll be gone again. And that's -- that's not on you, that's on me. And it's not fair of me to put it on you. But I'm scared.”

Truth be told, Billy’s scared, too.

He doesn’t know how they’re going to resolve it, but he just knows that Steve was willing to *try* this. That they’d figure it out at the end of the summer. Selfishly, Billy had always imagined Steve leaving with him -- but he knows that’s not entirely realistic. He knows he might have to make sacrifices, too. He knows, faintly, even though he tries not to think about it, that this whole thing might not even work out.

“It’s hard,” Billy says, after a beat, “to not think about the future.”

“The past, too.” Steve says, and finally tilts his face up, finally looks at him, with those big, brown eyes. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. That was cruel of me.”

Billy swallows.

“Look,” he says, fingers moving to brush over Steve’s cheekbone, soft. Gentle. “If you don’t want --” he pauses, then swallows again, pushing forward because he has to say this, because it can’t be left unsaid. “If you don’t want to do this, if you think it’s not going to work out, if you think I’m just going to leave before we try everything to make it work -- tell me?”

“Billy,” Steve breathes, catching his hand and leaning into his touch, cheek pressed to Billy's palm. “I've never wanted anything more than I want you. And I'd do everything, try everything, to keep you.”

Billy cups Steve’s face, feels his heartbeat under his fingertips.

“You don’t have to,” he says. “I just want you to know, that you don’t have to. But I’m willing to try, too. To do anything.”

He swallows.

“I know that you don’t trust me.” He jostles Steve with his knee when he tries to open his mouth, tries to argue. “I *know* you don’t, not totally, and I wouldn’t either, okay? You’re clearly worried about me leaving, even if it’s buried down there a hundred layers under the surface.”

Steve's face breaks. With guilt, with sorrow, with remorse. He clutches at Billy's wrist and presses a kiss to Billy's palm.

But then something firms. In the furrow of Steve's brow, in the press of his lips.

“I trust that you don't want to hurt me,” Steve says, and he leans up, leans forward -- slides between the spread of Billy's thighs to press a kiss to Billy's chest, to his heart, through his shirt. “And, to me, that's what matters.”

“Jesus, Steve,” Billy says, voice gone a little breathy. “I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t ever hurt you. Never again.”

“I know,” Steve says, taking Billy’s face between his hands, kissing his chin, the corner of his mouth. “I know, sweetheart.”

Billy still feels all shaken up inside, though he no longer feels like he’s moments away from boiling over. He grips his fists into the back of Steve’s shirt, fingers tight. Eyes closed, he presses his forehead to Steve’s and just breathes in.

Steve's thumbs drag back and forth over his cheeks. They stay like that, Steve on his knees between Billy's legs, Billy clutching Steve close, for a while.

“C'mon,” Steve says, coaxing. “Come upstairs. Let me apologize proper. Let me show you how much I trust you.”

Billy’s heart thuds heavy in his chest, loud and insistent.

“ *Steve* ,” Billy breathes out, and then nods.

He lets Steve stand up, lets Steve take his hand, lets him pull Billy up

the stairs.

When they get there, they don't go to the bed like Billy expects. Instead, Steve ushers him into his bathroom and presses him back against the counter with careful hands.

“You stink,” Steve says, smile crooked and tentative. “Shower with me.”

Billy nods again.

Steve strips him with careful hands, and then Billy does the same to Steve, until all their clothes are discarded in a pile on the ground.

He feels raw, like an open wound, like something’s still bristling underneath his skin. But each brush of Steve’s hands makes him feel better, soothes out that jaggedness under the surface.

And Steve won't stop touching him. It's gentle, incessant, and kind. The way he trails his fingers over his shoulders, down his arms. The way he plucks up Billy’s medallion, thumbing over the silver Virgin Mary, and then pressing his lips to it. The way he takes Billy’s hands in his and walks back, guides Billy to the shower.

They haven't been like this, this bare to one another, yet. Haven't had much more than a hint of skin while they sleep, touches kept simple and sweet and lingering.

But when they step under the wash of warm water together, none of it matters. Not the monsters, not the argument, not their past or their future.

The only thing that matters is Steve, pressing up close and dragging his fingers through Billy's wet curls for him. All that matters is this, this complete intimacy, this moment standing under the water with Steve and letting it wash them both clean.

Billy breathes it in, the smell of Steve and the heat of the shower. Cocooned in the warmth of this small space, he feels safe and stable, like the world outside of this simply ceases to exist.

It’s when Steve tilts Billy’s head back, washing shampoo that smells

like mint and rosemary down the drain that Billy breaks. It's a strangely gentle thing, the way it creeps up on him, the way he blinks water out of his eyes and crowds in close to Steve, pulling him into a tight embrace.

"Steve," he says, lips at Steve's throat. His voice is wet and raw. "I still love you. I never stopped. I never stopped loving you."

" *Billy* ," Steve breathes, cradling the back of his head, arm slipping around his waist as he presses into his touch. "Billy, I-- I've *always* -- you have to know I've always loved you --"

Billy noses along Steve's neck, water falling over his head, rivulets running over his cheeks, down his face.

"It's different now," Billy says, because it is. Because the feeling is brighter, more sure, more steady. Just like the both of them -- more in focus, stronger. "Jesus, I love you."

Steve shudders. "Say it again."

Billy pulls back, just so that he can look at Steve through the steam in the room, at those gorgeous eyes of his.

"I love you," Billy says.

Steve nods as he leans in. Presses his forehead to Billy's and nudges at his nose with his own.

"I love you, too." Steve says. "I'm sorry your boyfriend is a stupid idiot."

Billy sighs, all the air escaping his lungs in one go. "I'm not going to argue," Billy says, "because if you think you can stop me from trying to protect you, you *are* an idiot."

"Okay," Steve slumps against him. "Okay."

Billy stays quiet while he lathers up Steve's hair, getting his fingers into the thick of it. He's quiet as he washes it out, gently tipping Steve's head back to keep it all out of his eyes. He's quiet as he kisses Steve, too, while Steve's eyes are still closed, while Steve's hair is still

dripping with hot water.

Steve's hands linger on Billy’s hips until he's done. When he pulls back, Steve presses in for another kiss. Then another.

Billy ends up pressing him against the cool relief of dark stone, like he'd imagined a month ago, crowding Steve and kissing him slow and sweet and deep.

Eventually, Billy pulls back, panting. Steve’s fingers are twisted in his hair, and Billy’s are a mirror’s of his.

“We should --” *stop* , Billy thinks. *Keep going* , he also thinks. “Probably get out of the shower,” he says.

“Yes,” Steve nods, throat working. “Yeah. We should -- we should get out. We'll get pruny.”

But he doesn't move to let Billy go. Instead, he kisses him again. Just as slow, just as sweet.

Billy loses himself in it for a while. It’s the safety of the shower, the comfort of Steve’s touch. He finds himself melting into it, finding balance by pinning Steve between cold marble and the hot spray of the shower.

Eventually, Steve pulls back, resting his head against the wall.

“We should dry off. Try to sleep.” Steve says.

“Yeah,” Billy says, stealing another soft kiss off of Steve’s lips. But he pulls back fully into the stream of water a beat later, pulling himself away from Steve’s warmth. “Good idea.”

Billy *wants* .

And he doesn’t want, too.

Not yet, not now, not while he’s so raw and while they’re both feeling so fragile. Not with the lingering taste of hurt on his tongue, not with the fear sitting low in his stomach, something that feels a little too fresh to be a memory.

Steve follows him, when the water is off and they're all dried up, into the bedroom. He pulls Billy, hair still damp and skin still warm and bare, into the bed after him.

It’s almost strange, having nothing between the two of them. But Billy crowds in close, spooning his body around Steve’s, legs bunched up in the sheets at their feet.

“And you expect me to sleep like this?” Billy asks, half joking, because he can already feel the tug of fatigue at his eyelids, the calm weight holding his limbs down.

“Yes,” Steve says, catching his hands, tucking back against him, and Billy can hear his smile. “Everything else can wait until morning. You need to rest.”

“ *You* need to rest,” Billy grumbles, lips up against Steve’s neck.

“Yes,” Steve agrees. “And I'm half tempted to take a valium to do it.”

“If you need to,” Billy says, “do it. I’ll be right here.”

Keeping watch. Keeping Steve safe.

Steve smooths his hands over Billy's arms. “I'll try it like this first.”

“Okay,” Billy says, stifling a yawn. “I love you, baby.”

Steve pulls his arms tighter around him. “I love you, too.”

-*-

It takes three days for Billy to feel at ease with leaving Steve's side. It takes until the day of the fourth of July, a promising night to look forward to, before Billy spends any time outside of Steve's gravitational pull.

He spends his morning with Max and Susan. Eating breakfast with them after Steve kissed him goodbye and told him Marissa’s car broke down and she needed someone at the library with a promise to meet him at the quarry with the kids as soon as he could.

And it's the first time Billy had fallen back to sleep after, without any dread in his belly, thinking Steve might sneak off to the lab or whatever tunnels he's mentioned.

Still, when Steve shows up at the quarry, sometime past noon, in swim trunks and a shirt that Billy thinks is his own, he's filled with a dizzying rush of relief.

“Hey baby,” Billy says, sprawled out over a fluffy towel, peering over his sunglasses at Steve.

“ *Gross* ,” says Mike Wheeler, who, for some reason, is sitting next to him, chowing down on some watermelon with El. It’s probably Mike’s infatuation with her that’s currently overriding his obvious disdain for Billy.

“Hey,” Steve says, dropping to his knees next to him, leaning in and snatching his sunglasses off so he can steal a kiss.

“ *Extra* gross,” Mike huffs.

El rolls her eyes.

“I think it’s cute,” she says. Billy hands her an extra slice of watermelon for that. And also because she’s awesome.

“Hear that, Wheeler? We’re *cute* .”

Billy wraps his arms around Steve and tugs him down onto the towel. He presses his lips to Steve’s neck, breathes him in, and asks, “Is that my shirt?”

Steve glances down at himself, makes a face while he does it, chin folding. “I think so? Just picked up the first one I could find.”

It’s a soft white thing that Billy’s washed too many times from a record shop back in California.

“It looks good on you,” he says, because it does. Because Steve looks good wearing Billy all over him.

“Yuck,” Mike says.

“Suck it, Wheeler,” Billy says.

Mike grunts, takes El by the wrist, and pulls her up as she giggles, chasing after him back to the water. Steve smiles as they go, and he puts Billy’s sunglasses on his own face as he settles down next to him.

“They’ve been in love for forever,” Steve tells him. “I thought they would run off and try to get married forever ago.”

Billy squints into the light, but he doesn’t steal his sunglasses back.

“You think they’re gonna?”

“Hopper would kill ‘em,” Steve laughs, looking at him. “They gotta *finish college* first. I dunno, though. I didn’t even go to college.”

Billy hums and turns onto his side, curling a bit around Steve as he settles into a more comfortable position.

“Neither did I,” Billy says. “But it’s not like *that’s* what’s preventing me from getting married.” He shrugs. “If they wanna, they should just do it.”

Steve’s lips purse, and Billy can’t see his eyes behind his own aviators, but he knows Steve is hunting over his face-- the way he does, sometimes. “Yeah. They should. If they want to.”

And Billy knows he’s not just talking about El and Mike. Knows he means something else, even if he’s not saying it. Knows he isn’t talking about marriage or weddings or things that they can’t have-- but maybe he is, a little, in a way.

“How was your morning?” Steve asks.

Billy shrugs. Because mornings in Hawkins are always slow. Because he woke up alone after he had fallen back asleep in Steve’s bed.

But the diner, for breakfast with Susan and Max, had been nice. Mundane, but nice.

“It was fine,” Billy says. “How was work?”

Steve's grin is slow. "It was fine."

Billy raises his eyebrow. "Just fine?"

"Yeah, you know. Books." Steve shrugs a shoulder, turning onto his side. "Kids. Old ladies. More books. Would've much rather stayed in bed with you."

Close to Steve, like this, the rest of the world feels far away. It's all background noise, a nice static hum around them.

"Yeah?" Billy asks, leaning in for a quick kiss. "I think I would've preferred that, too."

Steve hums, leaning in, chasing after his mouth like he's missed it, kissing him longer and slower. "Gonna watch the fireworks, tonight?"

"Dunno," Billy says, the taste of Steve still on his tongue. "Somehow managed to miss them last time. Had better things to be doing. Are they worth it?"

"Better things than fireworks?" Steve asks, sunglasses slipping down his nose, those big brown eyes bright with amusement.

Billy kicks at Steve with his feet.

"Pretty damn sure."

Steve laughs, flopping over onto his back, and he trails the backs of his fingers over Billy's stomach, over the way the muscles contract under skin at the touch. "I remember it being a little cramped for a first blow job."

"I remember it being --" *perfect* , Billy thinks. "Pretty alright."

Billy grins. When Steve makes a face, Billy leans forward and kisses his cheek.

"Fucking great," he says. "It was great."

"Damn fucking right it was great," Steve huffs, but he's smiling at

him until it turns crooked and sly, voice dipping low. “Your fingers in my hair, telling me how good I was doing.”

Something burns, and Steve rolls onto his side again, the backs of his fingers trailing down his ribcage, his side, thumbing at his hip. He leans in, the aviators crooked, lips ghosting at Billy’s cheek.

“The taste of you in my mouth,” he mutters. “We fogged up the windows.”

They sure as hell fucking did.

If they were in a car right now, Billy would be breathing hard enough to fog up those windows, too.

“Baby,” Billy says, tongue too big for his mouth. “Don’t tease.”

He only half means it.

He feels Steve’s smile, pressed right to his cheek, and then Steve is pulling back. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Billy says. “You’re just -- it’s a lot.”

That memory is like, the hottest thing ever.

“Is that code for you want me?” Steve asks, but his grin says he knows the answer.

“You’d be an idiot to think otherwise,” Billy says. “ *Obviously* I want you. So fuckin’ bad.”

Steve’s eyes go dark-- warm and wanting on his face, then down his chest. “Guess it’s good the feeling is mutual.”

It’s a pity they’re in the middle of the woods, by the quarry, because Billy is burning hot.

“I don’t wanna push you,” Billy says.

Steve grins, coy and sweet, pulling off Billy’s sunglasses and holding them out to him-- letting them dangle from his fingertips. “Maybe I

want you to push me."

"Yeah?" Billy asks, feeling a little out of breath as he reaches out to grab at the glasses. "You sure about that, King Steve?"

Steve leans in, kissing his cheek, and then pulls back. "Guess you'll just have to find out."

But he's stripping off his shirt. Pushing to his feet. Hollering at the kids as he wades into the water. They flail as he comes out-- no doubt hiding the booze cooler.

-*-

The storm comes out of nowhere. Even now, as they all run for the cars-- the kids for Wheeler's, Billy for his Camaro, Steve for his hatchback, towels over their heads like it will protect them from the sudden deluge-- there are patches of blue in the sky ahead of them. But behind them the sky is dark. Clouds rolling, thunderous and heavy, chasing at their heels.

Steve is laughing. The kids are, too, as Billy helps them get the coolers into Mike's trunk. Max has her head back, her tongue stuck out-- right until the lightning flashes. Until the thunder rumbles.

She yelps and darts into the back of the car.

Once the kids are all loaded up, Steve catches Billy and kisses him against the side of Camaro. Mike honks at them, and Billy can taste Steve's laugh against his mouth.

"I'll see you at home?" Steve asks, hair hanging in his face.

"Course," Billy says, stealing another kiss. "See you at home."

The drive is fast, rain buffeting Billy's windshield, Hawkins turned ocean around him. He beats Steve to the house, but stays in the car until he sees Steve's headlights in his rearview, until Steve's car pulls in next to him in the driveway.

For a moment, they sit like that in the driveway. Rain battering down on both of their cars. Billy catches Steve's eyes, through water,

through glass, and can see him grinning. See him laughing. Steve gestures to the front door like he's daring him to go first.

And Billy's never once backed down from a dare. The car door slams behind him and he books it toward the door, feet kicking up water from puddles, rain drops catching on his eyelashes, landing on his tongue as he laughs, wild and loud and free in the bucketing rain.

Steve isn't far behind him, though. Billy's shirt is on him, soaked through, but at least he's wearing swim trunks. He left his flip flops in the car again.

Billy doesn't even try to open the door. Instead, he turns and catches Steve. Pulls him close. Kisses him, rain streaming down both of their faces as they grin into it, as they laugh.

"I love you," Steve mutters against his lips.

"I love you too," Billy says with a grin, eating up Steve's words, letting them warm him against the cool rain.

Finally Billy breaks off the kiss and fumbles with the door, with the key Steve gave him. They stumble inside, in a flurry of movement and water and glee.

Steve doesn't stray from him long. Takes enough time to shut the door, but then he's on Billy again. Kissing him long and slow and sweet, hands sliding along his jaw, their knees knocking.

Billy doesn't *want* to stop, doesn't want to break away. He pushes closer, until Steve's back is up against the door and there's a puddle of rain water steadily growing underneath them. He leans into Steve's hands, getting his own into Steve's wet hair, fingers carding into it to tug, to pull.

It earns him a little groan. Steve's head lulls back, until they're just panting against each other's mouths.

"Is this okay?" Billy asks, pulling back just enough that he can mouth over Steve's jaw.

"Yeah," Steve breathes, turning his head for him, giving him more.

Billy takes what is freely given, eating up the inches of skin that are offered up, tasting Steve on his tongue. He should be cold, damp in the roaring air conditioning of Steve's house, but he's not. He's burning up, heartbeat pounding hot blood through his veins.

He can't keep his hands from roaming, from pushing up the soaked material of Steve's shirt, first exploring over his ribs, then escaping all pretense to just tug Steve's shirt off, up and over his head.

"Jesus, look at you," Billy says, words a rush of what feels like steam, out of his mouth, breath hot against Steve's skin.

Steve's lashes flutter, his head knocking back against the door, throat working under Billy's lips. He shudders, hands moving, sliding over Billy's shoulders and down his back. Tugging him closer until it's skin on skin. Warmth blossoming between them.

"I don't think there's gonna be any fireworks tonight," Steve says.

Billy chuckles, teeth nipping at Steve's neck.

"I mean, I bet I can make you see some fireworks," Billy says with a grin.

Steve snorts, but he arches and shudders and lets out a breath. "Yeah, I bet you could, too."

"Do you want that?" Billy asks, words against Steve's ear.

Steve's breath catches, stalls, and his throat works again. " *Yes* ."

Billy reaches up and thumbs over Steve's jaw, fingers running over the slight stubble there. Billy leans in and kisses the rough grains of it, too.

"You sure?" Billy asks. Because he wants to know, because he wants it to be perfect for Steve.

Steve catches him by the wrists, turns his face and catches his mouth too. A soft, slow assurance -- until they're standing there, foreheads resting together.

“Billy,” he says, chiding; *teasing* . “I swear to god, if you don't take me to bed and have your wicked way with me, I'm gonna find someone who will --”

And that’s all the encouragement that Billy needs.

He presses in, steals another kiss. Hotter. Faster. Heavier than Steve’s.

“Don’t you dare,” Billy says, but he’s grinning against Steve’s lips, laughing a little.

Then, he takes Steve’s hand in his, fingers slipping into knots with Steve’s. And he tugs, pulling Steve back, and then up the stairs, and then into Steve’s room. Billy kisses him then again, fingers over his ribs, over his warm skin. Constantly touching, like he can’t ever get enough.

Steve's not much better. His hands are everywhere -- smoothing down his sides, around to his back, kneading into the muscles between his shoulder blades as he leads them back further into the room. He's humming, against Billy's lips as they share kiss after kiss, body warm; mouth warmer.

When the backs of Steve's knees hit the edge of the bed, he twists and pushes. Topples Billy over, onto the mattress, and follows quickly after, knees on either side of his hips, hands framing his face to draw him into another kiss as he curves over top of him.

And *god* , it feels so good, the soft mattress pushing up against his back, Steve’s hard frame bracketing him down. It’s exactly what he wants, what he needs. Billy can’t help but arch up against the pressure, rocking up against Steve just to feel *more* .

Billy kisses him like he’s drowning, like Steve’s his only chance for air.

“I love you,” Billy says, gasping. “Jesus, you’re perfect.”

His fingers find Steve’s hips and he pulls, rocking Steve’s hips down against his own, encouraging. It earns him a ragged gasp of a sound, a stutter of Steve's hips grinding down against his own.

“Careful,” Steve breathes, kisses scattering over his cheeks, his nose, his jaw. “It's been a while.”

As if making Steve lose it, even a little early, is a *bad* thing.

Billy just grins, and he can feel it, spreading wide across his face. He tugs Steve down again, at the same time that Billy arches his hips up. He stifles his own groan, pleasure spreading across his nerves like heat lightning, in patches, in spurts.

“Who says I want to be careful?” Billy asks.

“*Christ*, Billy.” Steve presses his face into the curve of Billy’s throat, breath hot and wet there as he rolls his hips in reply.

Steve’s voice, raw and rough and trembling, is enough to light a fire in Billy’s gut. He presses up, arching off the bed, but he doesn’t buck Steve off of him. He likes the weight, likes Steve pressing him down against the bed. He likes *looking* at Steve, even if Steve’s face is hidden from him.

Billy tips his neck, giving Steve more access, to the sensitive skin hidden away there. For a second, all Steve does is breath, hips moving in shallow, slow motions as he pants against him.

But then Billy feels him press a kiss, sweet and delicate, to the heavy pound of his pulse. It belies nothing but affection.

It certainly doesn't prepare him for the sudden *rush* that comes when Steve rolls his hips down hard, long and just as slow, as he *bites* at that same place -- friction and a hint of pain lighting up his nerves.

Billy groans, loud in the quiet of the room. It's so unexpected that he shakes with it, overwhelmed and shuddering. Here he was, trying to get Steve close, and here Steve is, breaking Billy down.

“Baby,” Billy manages. “Fuck. Wanna get my mouth on you.”

Steve hides a moan against his throat. “You always want your mouth on me.”

“That's not a lie,” Billy agrees, words wet and needy. “But I still

wanna. Unless you want to come like this.”

Steve breathes heavy for a moment, rocking with him. It hitches, catches between them, and then he's pulling back to steal Billy's mouth in a kiss.

“Like this,” Steve says.

Billy breathes out a sigh, ragged and rough. *Okay*, he thinks, that, he can do.

“Okay, baby,” he says, fingers digging in, pulling Steve’s hips down to meet Billy’s as he rolls his hips up. “Whatever you want.”

Because Billy would give him anything. Anything at all.

“You,” Steve hums, lips a fire along his jaw, moan breathy and shuddering in his ear. “I just want you.”

Billy wants to get his pants off, wants to feel Steve’s skin, slick with sweat, against his own. But there’s something powerful about this, something heady. Something that reminds him of fever hot summer nights, frantic and needy and overwrought. He can’t help but think back to how much he *wanted* Steve back then, how the sheer thought of Harrington drove him crazy, drove him wild.

And it’s not too different, now -- except Billy’s not untethered, he’s not without reigns. He needs Steve just as badly, but he has the time to savor it, too.

So, Billy rolls his hips upward, grinding his dick against Steve as he tugs Steve down. Encouraging. Wanting.

“You got me, baby,” Billy says. “You got me.”

Steve lets out a soft sound. He catches one of Billy's hands, squeezing, and threading their fingers together.

Steve pulls back enough to let their foreheads rest together. He braces a hand over Billy's chest and sets a rhythm. It's slow but steady. Drawn out and burning as they rock. As they rut.

Their kisses are messy, lazy things when they catch their breath enough to try. Steve's moving over him, against him, *with him* perfectly.

Billy can't stop himself from catching Steve in a kiss. It's messy and wet and without any finesse, more breathing into Steve's mouth than actually kissing him. But Billy *needs* it, needs to feel Steve as close as possible, needs to lick into his mouth to taste him as his body shakes.

"*Billy*," Steve hisses, and Billy can feel it -- the way his hips stutter, the way his body falters and shudders -- how close he is. "I can't -- I'm not --"

Billy tightens his grip around Steve's hips, fingers right on the seam between skin and cloth. He lets his fingertips dig in, urging Steve down harder, pushing his hips faster.

"C'mon, Steve," Billy pants. "Take what you need. *C'mon*."

Because Billy is close, too. Because watching Steve get like this, because hearing the way it breaks in his voice? Nothing in the world is hotter.

Steve shakes apart. Bucks and rides down, working against him as he bites back the sweetest keening Billy's ever heard. Sobs as he comes, fingers clutching at Billy's hand on his hip, digging into the flush on Billy's chest as he gasps in breath after breath to ride it out.

Billy curses, surging up to catch Steve's mouth, to lick all those little sounds straight out of it. It's so much, too much, Steve coming apart on top of him like this, shuddering underneath Billy's hands.

It pushes Billy over, too. All it takes is a couple more rolls of his hips and he's gasping, groaning, kissing Steve again. Trying to find an anchor while the pleasure washes over him.

He feels wrung out by the time it's over, threadbare and exhausted. "Fuck," he manages, voice rough when he breaks away from Steve's mouth. "*Fuck*."

Steve slumps against him, face resting against his collar, shivering. "Yeah."

Billy tugs his arms around Steve and rolls them both, so he's the one bracketing Steve down. He presses Steve down against the sheets with his body, until Steve's shivering isn't quite so pronounced.

Billy hums, nosing around at Steve's neck, kissing the sweat damp skin there.

"Feel like we might need a shower. The aftermath of that is always a little...uncomfortable."

"Coming in your pants is uncomfortable?" Steve asks, on a breathy laugh even as his tone drips with sarcasm, smile lopsided when Billy sees it. "I'd never noticed."

"I think you kinda like it," Billy says, teeth grazing over Steve's skin. "Making a mess."

Steve's skin burns, delightfully pink, and he scoffs out a sound. "Don't be ridiculous."

Billy laughs a little, because Steve's *cute*. And it's endearing that he he can be shy about something like that.

"Mm, so it *doesn't* turn you on when I get you so hot and bothered, so goddamn needy, that you come in your pants?" Billy asks, voice low, right at Steve's ear.

Steve shudders and it ripples up between them. Billy hears his throat click when he swallows.

"Not at all," he says, but it's a lie.

It might be a challenge, too.

Billy can't help himself. He snakes a hand down between them and runs his palm over Steve's crotch, hastening the spread of the wet patch there.

"But you made a mess of yourself, baby," Billy says. He takes Steve's ear into his teeth and bites, gently. Just a nip.

Steve *groans*, turning his face like he's trying to hide it, even as his

hips lurch up. “*Billy*.”

“What?” Billy asks, voice the picture of innocence. “What’s wrong, baby?”

He palms Steve again, feeling his dick twitch underneath the pressure of Billy’s hand. God, he must be sensitive, still. It must feel embarrassing, rocking into his own come, still wet in his swim shorts.

Steve wedges a hand between them and grips Billy’s wrist. His face is a wonderful shade of pink.

He doesn't pull Billy's hand away.

“Don't start something if you don't intend to finish it,” he says, voice trembling, pupils blown out wide.

“What, you think I don't intend to help you make even more of a mess of yourself?”

Billy mouths at Steve's jaw, feels the way his pulse beats heavy against Billy's lips.

Steve arches up under him, huffing out a breath that almost sounds like a laugh. His hips lurch into his touch and he bites out a whine, rutting against his palm.

“Look at you, baby,” Billy says, as Steve squirms underneath him. “Such a mess. So good. You're so good for me.”

Billy cups Steve through his pants, feels the way he's wet now, rocking into it. Steve grunts, and his hands come up to clutch at Billy's shoulders, fingers flexing and then digging in as he pants. As he *trembles.*

“Jesus, Billy.” Steve breathes, and Billy can feel his arousal -- can see it, how he moves with it, lets Billy coax pleasure out of him.

Billy isn't rushed about it. He likes the way Steve shakes, the way he shivers. He likes dragging it out of him slowly, chipping him apart leisurely. And sure, Billy’s turned on, too, but he's solely focused on Steve, on the little noises he makes, on how he grabs at Billy with

frantic hands.

“C'mon,” Steve whispers, voice shaky with desire, body quivering with it. “C'mon, Billy. I need -- c'mon. *More.*”

“Isn't this enough, baby?” Billy asks, squeezing Steve's cock in his fingers, palm pressing down. “You're saying you need more?”

Steve chokes on a sound, eyes squeezing shut as his jaw goes loose while he pants and jerks into his touch. “*Billy*.”

Billy keeps it up. Touching Steve just enough to keep his breath on the edge, to keep his panting ragged and his voice breathy. Enough to leave Steve squirming and writhing beneath him. Just as much as Billy loves Steve pressing him down and into the bed, he likes doing the same to Steve. And besides -- Steve’s noises are way prettier than his own.

“You gonna come for me again? Make a mess of yourself?”

Billy licks a stripe down Steve’s neck, tongue hot and wet against sweaty skin.

“*Fuck,”* Steve hisses, shuddering up, nails biting in at his shoulders. “Yes, I-- *yes*.”

Billy would give anything to keep Steve like this, strung out and absolutely trembling, on the verge of orgasm. But he *wants* to see Steve shatter again, wants to hear him come. Billy *needs* it.

So he rocks his hand against Steve's cock, providing a bit more friction, a bit more pressure for Steve to rut up against.

“C’mon, baby. Come on. Come for me,” Billy asks, teeth at Steve's throat, his jaw, his ear. “Make a mess again. Just for me.”

He hears him gasp. Hears the sound of it break as pleasure crests over Steve's face.

His body strings tight, like a bow, and Billy feels him twitch, spasm, *break* as he comes apart for him.

It sends a rush through Billy, has him leaning down, catching Steve's lips with his own to kiss him hungrily. Eating up each and every noise that tumbles from Steve's throat.

Billy relents when Steve whines, pulling his hand back, pulling back to give Steve some space to breathe.

“Holy *shit,*” Billy says. “Jesus. It's not that I forgot how hot you are, but -- *fuck*.”

Maybe he did forget, just a little bit, how bad Steve gets to him. How much Billy is turned on by how easy Steve is under Billy’s hands.

Steve groans, eyes fluttering as he goes lax against the bed. His chest rises and falls with shuddering breaths, muscles bunching and then going easy as the aftershocks quake through him. There's a flush, high on his cheeks and down his throat.

He's gorgeous.

“Forgot,” Steve mutters, words slow but eyes bright when he finally lulls his head to meet Billy's gaze. “How *dangerous* your fucking mouth is.”

And Billy grins.

“And to think, I didn't even get my mouth on you,” Billy says. He presses a slow kiss to the corner of Steve's mouth and breathes the moment in, before pulling back. “Well. I haven't *yet*, anyway.”

-*-

“Wow,” Billy says.

He takes a moment to really soak in the picture Steve has presented him with, but it’s almost too much. Billy takes in a breath, leans himself on the wall separating the roller-rink from the bystanders, and whistles.

“Those are some *short* shorts, King Steve,” Billy says, letting his gaze wander down to Steve’s teal shorts. There’s only a few precious inches of fabric there for Billy to admire, which does a decent job of

distracting him from the true glory of Steve's outfit: his roller skates. Pink, blue, teal -- they're a wash of colors, well-loved and scuffed, but still just as ridiculous.

Billy is in love with a *total dork*.

Steve's grinning as he coasts up to the divider, resting an elbow to it. "Don't get too excited. We're in public."

It's been hard, the last few weeks, to keep his hands to himself.

Since the storm on the fourth, since finally crossing the bridge Steve had laid between them back in June, that's all Billy's wanted. That's all Steve's wanted, it seems, too-- because he certainly hasn't shied from his attentions. Not in bed, not in the shower, not in the kitchen, not in the welcoming back of Steve's car.

They're making up for lost time, Billy thinks. Scrambling to catch up.

"Yeah, because the sight of you looking like a dweeb really gets me going," Billy says with a laugh.

He leans a little more against the barrier, nearly hanging over it as he grins, as he traces his own lips with his tongue. He can't kiss Steve here, but he wishes he could.

Steve looks at him and hums, like he knows exactly what he's thinking.

He's been doing that a lot more, too. Like he had, so many summers ago, looking at Billy and *knowing*.

It steals his breath sometimes, to think they've gotten close enough for that again. That Steve feels safe in assuming. That he's one step shy of that earth shattering trust he'd given him once before a long time ago.

"You gonna stand there like a chicken all day or skate, big guy?" Steve grins, instead of calling Billy on his bullshit, skating easy curves back and away from him.

Honestly, even though he *knew* where he was going, Billy hadn't

stopped to think about joining in. He had prepared to laugh at the kids, to ogle Steve, but he the thought of joining in, of strapping on ugly skates and joining in? Never once occurred to him.

“As much *better* than I'd be at it than you,” Billy says, “I think I'll pass.”

“C'mon,” Steve says and glides on a slow circle around himself. “It'll be fun. In thirty minutes, they'll put the blacklights on.”

“*Wow*,” Billy says, drawing out the word, tone amplified in sarcasm. It’s always easier to channel the Billy Hargrove he was years ago when he’s back in the public eye in Hawkins, back under scrutiny. “Sounds *really cool*, King Steve. I don’t think I’m cool enough for that kind of thing.”

As he leans on the bannister, he watches the kids skate around behind Steve. Some of them are better on the wheels than others -- Max and Lucas fly by, doing lazy circles around a grumbling Mike, who looks shaky on those long legs of his. Dustin and El are gliding lazily, elbows linked, giggling, on skates that rival Steve’s for egregious in color. Will isn’t even skating, just perched by the other side of the rink, talking and laughing with some boy Billy doesn’t know.

But when he looks at Steve again, he's frowning. There's a furrow between his brows and everything.

He opens his mouth, looks like he might call Billy on his bullshit after all, but falters as a trio of girls go by -- arm in arm, tittering at him and batting their lashes. *Hi, Mr. Harrington*, they say and then skate on, not nearly as subtle as they think they are, glancing back at Steve over their shoulders.

Steve huffs out a breath, hands on his hips, blush on his face, and looks back at Billy. “Alright. Have fun watching, then, I guess.”

“On second thought,” Billy says, watching the girls skate away, “where do I pick up the skates?”

Five minutes later, Billy is lacing up a pair of boring black skates,

infinitely glad that he wore socks and boots today. Steve watches from the rink, and Max has filed in alongside him, grin on her face.

“What are you looking at?” Billy asks her.

“I’m just here for the show.”

“It’s *rollerskating*,” Billy says. “How hard can it be?”

Max makes a face. “You ever skate the boardwalk?”

Steve's still got that frown on his mouth, like he isn't quite sure what's happening.

“You know damn well I didn’t,” Billy says. “Those kids were losers.” Max was absolutely one of those kids.

When Billy stands, he wobbles.

“Oh, this is gonna be hilarious.” Max grins. “I'm gonna go see if Will brought his Polaroid.”

Steve watches her skate off, brows pinched, and then looks at Billy. Resting forward on his elbows, he tilts his head.

“You don't have to do this if you don't want.”

“It can’t be *that* hard,” Billy says. “It’s fine.”

Eventually, he makes it to the bannister where Steve is leaning.

Somewhere in the rink, there are three girls who think *Mr. Harrington* is hot shit. Years ago, *Billy* was the one who was hot shit. Years ago, there would be people clamoring for *his* attention.

Steve is still frowning. “You sure?

“I'm sure,” Billy says.

He takes one step, getting himself into the rink, and nearly falls. But he catches himself on the bannister and rights himself, wobbly, on the skates.

He did this when he was a kid -- he can pick it back up again, right?

Steve's hands go out for him and then falter halfway. He stops, lets them fall back to his sides and then skates back a few paces -- giving Billy space he's not sure he wants.

“Go a few laps by the wall first,” Steve suggests.

“I don't need the wall,” Billy huffs, though he very well does.

“Billy’s a big fat liar,” Max says, skating up next to them.

“Shove it,” Billy says, rolling forward a little bit as kids skate past them, chattering away.

Steve glances out at the crowds. There's something in his shoulders that Billy can't quite place.

“Want me to leave you to it?” he asks.

Billy -- doesn’t know the right answer to that. Years ago, he would’ve said *yes*, would’ve pushed and powered through until he was doing it all alone.

But this *isn’t* years ago. Billy isn’t that person anymore. Or he’s trying very hard not to be.

“What,” Billy says, drawing his tongue over his lips. “You aren’t going to offer me private lessons?”

Steve shakes his head, glancing over at him. “No. I'll hold your hand, but only if you want me to.”

Billy looks around, at Steve and at all the kids around them. At Max, who’s rolling her eyes, and at Will with his Polaroid skating toward them. He looks at the girls who made eyes at Steve earlier, across the rink.

And Billy sticks out his hand.

Steve stares at it, at him for a second, and then takes it -- helping him balance as he coaxes Billy forward at an easy pace. His hand is warm,

right, in Billy’s.

Steve's not looking at him, though. He's got his eyes ahead of them, watching the busy rink.

It feels like it could be a soft moment. A tender one. If only Billy hadn't made some misstep along the way, if only Steve would look at him.

It's easier, though, holding Steve's hand. Billy is less clumsy, less unstable on his feet.

“Thanks,” Billy says, after two loops of silence.

Steve hums, giving him a little smile that isn't quite right, either. “Anytime.”

Billy frowns. “You don't have to hold my hand, you know. I think I can manage to not fall on my ass now.”

It's a total lie, but. But there's *something* wrong and Billy's got no idea what it is.

Steve's hand flinches from his, but his face doesn't falter. Smile pleasant, placid, and completely plastic.

“Okay,” Steve says, a little slow, and then coasts a bit, putting more space between them. “Better?”

Well *no,* Billy thinks. It's not like he wanted to drop Steve's hand, but. Maybe Steve did. So Billy gave him an out and he took it.

“Tell me this gets easier,” Billy says, because he's not going to lie to Steve. Because all of his attempts at something close to flirting have fallen flat.

Steve blinks at him. “The skating?”

“...Sure,” Billy says, because he hadn't even realized he might be asking about something else entirely all along.

“Of course,” Steve says, shrugging. “It just takes a little practice.”

Billy grits his teeth and propels himself forward. It's a bit like walking, but ungainly and awkward. Max cackles every time he stumbles or teeters, but he keeps himself upright, at least.

Next to him, Steve huffs out a short laugh. “Stop trying to walk. Glide. You just push through -- it helps if you angle your feet out a little. Don't lift your feet and all.”

Billy grumbles.

But he tries it anyway, falling into an awkward pattern of trying to glide forward -- and it's easier. Better. Still far from graceful, but *way* better.

It's a couple more laps before Billy is steadier, still.

“Careful, King Steve. Maybe I'll show you up soon.”

Steve hums. “Maybe.”

The way he says it, the smile that's hiding on his face, makes Billy think Steve means *I doubt that*, but before he can call him on it, the lights are flicking off. Switching. Leaving the floor in a fluorescent glow.

The music that's been playing gets a little louder. Steve's skates are glowing -- the piping in his shorts, too. There are cheers everywhere and toward the center of three rink, some of the more talented rollerbladers are dancing in circles around each other.

“Told you,” Steve says, reaching out and plucking at the bright glow of Billy’s shirt. “Blacklights.”

Billy grins, wide in the strange darkness of the room. Some of the letters on Steve's shirt are glowing, too.

Billy reaches for them -- and then stumbles. He catches himself on Steve, looping his arm into Steve's once he's a little steadier again.

“Jesus, and you all say this is *fun* and not a *death trap.”*

“Most things that are fun around here tend to be a death trap,” Steve

admits, and he's a little stiff, but he presses a little closer to Billy anyways, sighing like he was tired of being so far away in the first place. “Billy?”

“Yeah?” Billy asks, fingers curling around Steve's arm.

Steve's mouth presses thin, but even in the odd light, Billy can see the burn of his eyes. “Do you hide back in California, too?”

The question startles him a little, enough that his hand loosens and then squeezes at Steve's arm.

“No,” he says slowly. “Not always.”

“But sometimes,” Steve nods slow, eyes straying. “And here -- always.”

“I used to, here.” It's a fact, plain and simple. “But I don't have to. I don't -- I mean, what do *you* want? This is your town.”

Billy, honest to god, would do anything Steve asked.

Steve shrugs again, hand dragging through his hair. “People already know about me, Billy. I don't hide it.”

Steve's emotions are palpable, brittle in the air around them. Billy's got no idea what to *do* with them. “We were holding hands,” he says.

“I was helping you get your feet,” Steve says, meeting his eyes, coasting them to a stop by the wall. “This is something I have to know, going forward, Billy. I don't hide. Was I holding your hand or was I helping you?”

“Are they mutually exclusive?”

Steve huffs out a laugh. “I guess not.”

“Look, I'm not *good* at this kind of thing,” Billy says, after a few moments of gliding together in silence, arms still looped. “I'm not going to be all over you in public, but I can be more...open, if you want. If it means a lot to you, it's important to me.”

“I guess I just-- wanted to know what to expect,” Steve says. “Like, are we stuck behind closed doors for the rest of our lives? Because I don't -- I *won't* do that. And that's something you should know. I have enough secrets. Who I love shouldn't be one of them.”

“I'm not asking you to do that,” Billy says, earnest.

“You're not?” Steve asks, but it isn't accusatory.

“No?” Billy’s honest to god feeling more lost than he was before this conversation even started.

“So, just to be clear,” Steve says, shifting Billy’s hand on his arm until he's got it in his own, lacing their fingers together. “We're not hiding?”

He looks at him like he's waiting. For panic or anger or something blustering. Or maybe for that mask Billy had slapped on earlier at the wall, before jealousy got the better of him, something aloof and uncaring.

Waiting to see if Billy will push him away.

“No?” Billy asks, then squeezes Steve's hand. “No,” he reiterates, so it sounds less like a question, and more like he's sure. “I just didn't want to look like a goddamn dork,” Billy says. And then he stumbles again. “And I *suck* at this.”

Steve's smile finally goes easy and sweet again. “Is that all?”

“I cannot reiterate enough just how dorky you look,” Billy says with a grin. “Can not possibly.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve huffs, and Billy can't tell in the blacklight, but he thinks Steve is blushing. “I'm a huge dork. I get it.”

“And I'm way too cool to be falling on my ass, okay? I look way cooler on stable ground.”

But he can't argue that he likes the way his hand looks in Steve's when he looks down at them.

“I won't let you fall,” Steve says, still smiling, lifting their hands and squeezing. “And if you do, I'll go with you.”

“Ooh, perfect. I really wanna elbow you in the face when I go down.”

Billy laughs, but the air feels easier now. Steve's smile reaches his eyes and Billy doesn't feel like he's done something *wrong.*

Then Steve is pulling, coaxing him from the wall, smile going coy. His movements are slow. A few people dodge around them.

“C'mon,” Steve says. “I got you.”

“You sure?” Billy asks, forgetting about how he *looks* and focusing primarily on how he feels -- which is to say, absolutely *unstable.*

“Trust me,” Steve says, swinging around to catch his other hand, gliding backward as Billy follows him forward.

Billy laughs, he can't help it. “Jesus, you're such a dork.” But there Billy is, catching both of Steve's hands, basically letting Steve pull him forward.

“But it's working, isn't it?” Steve asks, then guides them into a lazy loop. “You haven't lost your footing once.”

Billy grumbles a little, but in a good-natured kind of way. Because he’s happy. And because Steve’s right: he hasn’t lost his footing once. The smile is stuck on his face and he’s as upright as he can be.

Mike makes a gagging noise from somewhere near them, skating by. Immediately, Billy hears him squawk, and hears Max laugh -- clearly, she smacked him. Because she’s a good sister.

“Alright. Maybe. *Maybe* this is a little fun,” Billy concedes.

“Only maybe, huh?”

“I mean, I still look like an absolute loser,” Billy says, eyes on Steve’s face, on his grin glowing in the back light. “But I *guess* the company isn’t all that bad.”

Steve squeezes at his hands. “You're right. You *do* look like a total loser.”

Billy barks out a laugh.

“Careful, baby. Pot, kettle.”

Steve slides to a quick stop, but momentum doesn't let Billy slow, and he runs into Steve's chest. To Steve's hands steadying him on his hips. To Steve's laughter in his ear.

“What was that about being careful?”

Steve is grinning, wide and stupid, and Billy can’t help it. He leans in and kisses Steve. It’s nothing too passionate or too involved, but it’s not too quick, either. It would be better if Billy wasn’t wobbling, but he’ll take it, as his hands find Steve’s hips before he pulls back, smile wide on his own face.

The look he gets, soft and pleased and adoring, is certainly worth all the trouble. Makes him feel like he's standing on steady ground.

-*-

“I don't think the hot tub actually *helped*,” Billy says, towling off his hair, perched on the edge of Steve's couch.

His ankles are *so sore*. So are various other freshly bruised parts of him from where he fell -- multiple times, every time he detached himself from Steve with the promise of *I got this*.

Maybe Billy's finally found something he's not good at.

But that's fine, because, despite the soreness, he *did* have a good time. And he ended his day making out with Steve in the hot tub until they were both dizzy and pruney as hell.

Steve hums, lounging across from him in one of the plush chairs, a cool towel over his head. His face is flush-- and so is the rest of him. Too much time in the hot water. Too many kisses.

“You’d be worse if you hadn’t gotten in,” Steve tells him, voice lazy

and slow. “Trust me.”

Billy wants to crawl over there, to crowd in on top of Steve and press into his space. He wants more of the heat they had been sharing earlier -- but he's tired. And he's sore. And he still doesn't want to push too much.

So Billy just grins a little and rests his elbows on his knees. “You real familiar with aching muscles, pretty boy?”

Steve peeks over at him, mouth quirking as he says -- “come find out”-- and it’s all the invitation he needs.

Straddling Steve is easy. So is ignoring the pain in his ankles. His swim trunks are still half wet, but Steve doesn't seem to care as Billy licks into his mouth, delving right back into what got them all dizzy in the first place, back in the hot tub.

Beneath him, Steve slouches down, until his head is resting back against the armrest-- sprawled sideways over the massive lounger like he is. He takes the weight of Billy in his lap easily, like it’s a comfort, and slides his hands up Billy’s thighs to squeeze at the tender muscles there as their tongues meet in a lazy tangle.

Billy *groans.* It's easy, milking the sound out of him, apparently. Easier than he thought. For a moment, he's startled by it, but doesn't let it trip him up much, indulging himself in Steve's mouth, instead.

Each time Steve's fingers press into a particularly sore knot, Billy groans, the sounds spilling from his throat as his hands find Steve's hair. Steve cranes up a bit, feeding on the sounds Billy’s making, working at the tension in his thighs with wicked fingers until pulling back with a little gasp of a sound.

“You’re tense,” Steve says, grin pressing to the corner of Billy’s mouth. “Relax. I’ll take care of you, yeah?”

Billy grunts, like he's going to try and argue that he's *not tense*, but he gives up the second Steve digs his thumbs in.

“Fuck,” Billy manages, only pulling away from the kiss so he can groan, cheek pressed against Steve's, breath going a little heavy.

Sure, he's been a *little* tense, but only because he's been so caught up in trying to be perfect. In trying to be perfect for Steve.

Steve lets out a little sound, turning his face to press a kiss to the place before Billy's ear. His hands are gentle and kneading-- up over his hips and to his lower back.

"Yeah," Steve says. "Definitely tight."

And that? Yeah, *that's* not fair at all. Sure, it's been five years since Steve pressed him down and called him *tight* but Billy hasn't forgotten. His hips jerk a little, rolling down of their own accord as fingers dig in next to his spine.

"Baby," Billy groans, his face finding the comfort of Steve's neck, teeth biting down.

Steve gasps and gives a little helpless laugh. A hand tangles into the curls at the back of Billy's head, soothing over his scalp before coaxing his face back so Billy can see the flush of Steve's cheeks.

"Let me take care of you?" he asks.

"Yeah," Billy breathes out, nodding with his eyes on Steve's face, "yeah okay."

He doesn't *let* people take care of him. Hasn't really, only really ever let Steve get that close, so long ago. But he trusts Steve, *wants* Steve. And hell, he wants Steve to take care of him, too.

Sitting up, Billy still in his lap, Steve catches his mouth in a hazy, lazy kiss. His hands are warm and gentle on his sides, thumbs working in steady circles across his skin.

"Get up," Steve says. "Let me get some stuff."

Billy steals one more kiss before sliding off Steve's lap.

"Bossy," Billy says, but it's a good shade on Steve. In a way, coupled with those strong hands on aching muscles, it makes Billy's breath tight.

Steve snorts, kissing him as he stands and tapping his hip. “Get those off.”

And then he's pulling back and grabbing one of the big blankets off of the back of the couch. He tosses it down on the ground by the fireplace, though it's too warm to light it, and he lays down an armful of pillows after it.

“I'll be right back,” Steve tells him. “Lay down, get comfy.”

Billy makes himself comfortable, sprawled out on his stomach on the soft blanket. He imagines Steve's hands, working into his muscles, still sore from hauling boxes of trash to the curb for Susan, and nearly groans with the thought itself.

But hell, he's so distracted now that his ankles barely hurt, so it works.

Steve takes his time coming back. But when he's there, he crouches on a pillow by his side and leans over him to kiss the shell of his ear. His hands are warm on his back; his touch gentle, soothing as Billy jumps in surprise.

“You're gorgeous,” Steve mumbles, and there's the *pop* of a cap and then something warm and slick and smelling like rosemary being worked into his shoulders.

“Pretty sure I should be telling you that,” Billy mumbles, into the crook of his arm, where he’s got one folded underneath his head. Because Steve’s the pretty one. *Billy’s* the one who lucked out.

The scent of rosemary is light in the air, relaxing Billy along with the work of Steve’s deft fingers. His muscles are tight: from the work he’s been doing, from falling, from a life of general unease. From, probably, if he’s *honest* with himself, the uncertainty of what’s going to happen at the end of the summer. It looms, again, and Billy can’t quite erase it from his mind.

Steve clicks his tongue and moves. There's a weight at his hips, and then Steve is settling over him, bare skin on bare skin as he slides a hand up his nape and works at the tension at the base of his skull.

“*Relax,”* Steve tells him, and it's not *fair*, not knowing Steve is bare and pressing against him. “I've got you.”

“I *am* relaxed,” Billy says, and it feels kind of like a lie even though he doesn’t *think* he’s lying.

Billy doesn’t think he’s a very high-strung person. But then again, he’s not exactly doing yoga and meditating on a regular basis, either.

So he tries to take a breath, tries to focus on the feeling of Steve’s fingers rubbing at his neck, and eventually, *eventually* he feels the beginnings of something start to slip from his spine.

“There you go,” Steve hums, pulling his attention down from his nape to the place between his shoulder blades.

Billy grunts as Steve’s fingers find the knots that live around his shoulders. He gasps, as Steve presses *in* and one of them breaks apart under the pressure.

“*Steve*,” Billy murmurs, as those fingers keep working, keep easing the tension from Billy’s back.

Steve makes a sound, but he seems intent on his task. On breaking Billy down, bit by bit, until he's something malleable and warm in his hands.

Billy loses time underneath the press of Steve’s fingers. He goes loose and easy before he realises it, thoughts floating cottony around him as he breathes, deep and easy, as he listens to Steve breathe, too.

Soon, after plying his arms and his legs with the same steady motions, Steve pulls away. Billy instantly misses his touch, a plaintiff sound escaping him.

It's met with a soft laugh and Steve lips pressing to his cheek. He taps at his hip again, gaze warm when Billy meets it.

“There you are,” he says, kissing his brow. “Turn over for me?”

It takes Billy a second, like he’s forgotten just how to move his limbs. Everything feels loose, easy, far away. For a moment, he’s worried

that moving might break that spell, but it doesn't. When he does, when he turns himself over, he's still just as relaxed, still just as pleasantly content as he was before.

It's another second before Billy realizes how hard he is, eyes trying to focus on Steve's face in the dim light of the room, closed as they had been for long moments before.

"Hey," Billy says, voice a little rough, a little dreamy.

"Hi," Steve says, just as soft, like he's just as scared he'll rouse Billy completely from his haze. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," Billy says.

And sure, he could pull himself from it if he wanted to, could try and blink himself back into somewhere closer to fully aware.

But -- he's not really sure he wants to.

"That's good," Steve says, grinning down at him, hands careful on his face, pushing his hair back from his forehead. "You *look* good."

Steve gaze strays pointedly downward. Then drags back up, ten times as slow.

"Can I take care of you?" he asks.

Billy grins, a little lopsided and a little stupid, too. "Thought you already were."

But he nods anyway, because he feels *good*, because he imagines Steve's hands on him and he just can't get enough of that thought, like he never wants it to end.

Steve laughs again, a soft thing, and dips down to kiss him. He presses slow, simple things to his lips, and along his jaw. Then down his throat to the steady pulse of his heart. He grazes his teeth there, but doesn't press too hard. Just enough to arouse a shock of sensation.

And Billy -- it's not that Billy *isn't* still in that dreamy state that he'd

been in before -- but Steve's mouth brings a hot spike of reality into it. Billy squirms underneath him, gasping out, hands going fast to grab at Steve's shoulders for a handhold, unwilling to lose his anchor.

"Fuck, *Steve*," Billy breathes out. It's not much -- and yet, every touch feels *so good*.

"Easy," Steve says against his throat, his hands warm and still a little slick, gliding down Billy's sides. "I've got you."

A hot flush of *want* spreads over him, settling in his gut. It's hot and fiery and suddenly impossible to ignore.

"Baby," Billy begs, figuring all he needs is a hand. A quick touch to get him off. Something easy and fast.

It doesn't even occur to him to ask for something *more*.

"You said I could take care of you," Steve says, trailing kisses over his chest. "Let me make you feel good."

Billy grins, a little slow, a little lazy. His fingers dig into Steve's skin. "Not stopping you."

Even though he sort of *was*. But he loosens his grip, the curl of his fingers, so Steve could slide free if he wanted to. Steve gives him a look, something half chiding and half amused, from beneath his eyelashes.

Then, he starts tracing invisible pathways over Billy's skin with his mouth. It's all lips, all tongue, and a hint of teeth just to make Billy's muscles jump.

Billy loves it, eating up every second of the attention. Normally he gets lost in dousing Steve in endless pleasure, milking him for all it's worth. It's almost hard to let go, to just *let* Steve -- but Steve's mouth is so good and his touch is so perfect that he's really got no choice.

Billy's breath comes hard, fists clenched in the blanket underneath him. "*Tease*," Billy groans out, finding himself squirming the lower Steve works down his body.

“Only if I don't follow through, sweetheart.” Steve grins at him, from somewhere by his navel, hands at Billy's hips, lips dragging over the line of his abdomen as it flexes. “ And I fully intend to follow through.”

Billy feels like he might come the second Steve touches him. He also feels a little like he’ll die if Steve doesn't get his hands -- or his mouth -- on Billy right now.

“*Please*,” he pants, fingers opening and closing on cloth.

Steve hums, mouthing over the jut of his hip. It's agonizing, the slow way he's taking him apart.

But then there's a hand on the base of his cock. Then there's Steve's lips, warm and wet and open as he presses kisses up the length of him.

A low noise finds itself in the back of Billy's throat, rumbling and appreciative.

“*Fuck*,” he says, hands going to Steve's hair for a handhold, for something to keep him from drifting away.

Billy's hips roll, seeking more friction, even though he trusts Steve to give him enough, trusts him to take care of him. Billy can't *help* it. He's so keyed up, so stretched thin, even relaxed as he is.

Steve holds him steady. Doesn't keep him still, but holds him firm with a hand on his hip. On the base of his cock.

His mouth is a searing relief. A blissful shock as he wraps his lips around him, tongue pressing under the head, warm and wet and welcoming.

Billy doesn't worry about being loud, a pleased groan ripping from his throat the second Steve's mouth envelops him.

It's slick and warm and wet and it's all Billy can do to not come right then and there, on the knife's edge.

“So good,” he pants out. “Not gonna last long, baby. Can't --” Billy

moans, cutting off his own words as he tries not to thrust up into Steve's mouth.

Steve moans, like that's exactly what he wants. Like he wants Billy to *lose it*. Like it's the hottest thing he's ever heard.

He sucks. Hollows his cheeks and swallows him down, petting at his hips, bobbing his head. It's bliss.

Billy's whole body is so loose, nerves aflame from all of Steve's attention. And of course Steve knows how to play him, how to get Billy squirming and gasping in a matter of moments.

It helps that he's *trying*.

Billy would be ashamed of how quickly Steve pushes him over the edge, but he's not. It feels too damn good. Steve swallows and sucks *just right* and then Billy's groaning with it, fingers tightening in Steve's hair as he comes, spilling himself into Steve's mouth.

He can't even *think*, head foggy with the rush of pleasure, endorphins singing, thoughts cloudy as he pants out Steve's name. And maybe a couple curses, too.

Steve works him through it. Sucks until he whines, strokes and licks over him until he bucks, until he rasps out a broken sound-- and only then does he pull away.

Littering kisses along the insides of his thighs, Steve pants, soothing Billy even as he tries to catch his breath.

Billy tries to push himself up, making it about halfway, resting on his elbows, body lax and muscles loose.

“Jesus,” he says, over sensitive and buzzed. “Thank you. I can -- help you out there. Just gimme a sec.”

“I'm good,” Steve tells him, mouth by his knee, hands working at sore calf muscles. “I'm taking care of you.”

“Yeah?” Billy grins and blinks down at his cock, still shiny in the dim light from Steve's spit and his own come. It's half hard, thanks to

Steve's attention after he came. “Pretty sure I'm taken care of.”

Steve hums-- practically purrs-- and drags the edges of his teeth up the inside of his thigh to his groin. Billy's cock twitches.

“You sure?”

Steve's breath is hot on his thigh and -- Billy swallows. Sure, he's teased Steve like this plenty, but Billy's usually more of a one-and-done kinda guy. But then again, sex with Steve is better than anything else Billy's ever had.

It's like Steve knows him better than himself.

“*Baby*,” Billy says, because it's not like he has an answer. He knows Steve's mouth on him now will be close to too much -- and he doesn't know how to say he *wants* that.

Steve's eyes narrow, but he's still gentle. Still soft. Touching Billy like he needs the care.

“Want it?” he asks-- *teases*-- lips pressing kisses to the sensitive skin that leads down to the curls of hair around his cock. “Want my mouth while I work you open?”

Billy's cock twitches again, blood rushing to it once more. And *fuck*, he hadn't even thought about that.

Hasn't let anyone fuck him in so long.

“Please,” he hears himself say, dizzy, aching. “God, *please,* Steve.”

“I got you,” Steve promises, and then his mouth is on him again-- still half hard, still sensitive-- suckling gently.

Working him up.

“Haven't,” Billy warns him, before letting himself fall back again, back flat against the floor. “Haven't, in a couple years.”

But he *wants*, more than anything.

Steve pulls off, letting his hands work where his mouth isn't, and kisses his hip. “Me either. I'll make it good.”

Billy laughs and the sound is light -- and a little breathy as Steve's hand slides over him.

“I don't doubt that.”

Steve smacks a kiss to his navel. “Careful. You'll inflate my ego.”

“Oh *no*,” Billy says, leaning up a little so he can smirk at Steve. “God forbid you think you're good in be--*ah fuck*,” Billy groans, hips bucking as Steve spits into his palm and does something sinful with his hand and the sensitive head of Billy's cock.

Steve hides his laugh against his stomach. He eases off a bit and then stops touching him all together.

He reaches over and plucks up a bottle. Pulling back, Steve rests back on his knees, smile small.

“You okay, sweetheart?”

Billy breathes for a moment, staring at the back of his eyelids.

“I mean, you stopped touching me, so --”

And yeah, maybe Billy's a little greedy. And maybe he's a little needy too, because he *misses* Steve's hands. He *needs* them.

“Gotcha,” Steve says on a laugh, and his hands smooth up from ankle, to knee, to thigh as he coaxes Billy's legs further apart. “I promise to not stop touching you.”

Billy nods and nods again.

Moments ago, he had only been thinking of Steve's hands on him. Now, he can't stop thinking about Steve's fingers inside him, can't stop thinking about Steve cock in him, filling Billy up impossibly full.

“Want you,” Billy says, voice low.

“You'll get me,” Steve promises, leaning over him, catching his mouth in a slow kiss. “Just relax.”

Billy does relax, once he’s kissing Steve. Once he’s sighing into Steve’s mouth and wrapping his arms around him, greedily pulling him close. It’s a little strange, how *near* he wants Steve, but he’ll take it, especially because Steve is eagerly giving it.

Better, Steve *rocks* against him. Drags their hips together in a slow rut that sends friction ricocheting along Billy's nerves. Rolls his hips steady and easy, his own cock sliding against Billy's, and it's *perfect*.

Perfect as Steve moans into his mouth. As he grips his hips. As he presses down harder, grinds a little dirtier until he pulls back gasping.

“Stop distracting me,” Steve mumbles, still rocking against him.

Billy grins, because he loves Steve like this. Even when Steve is trying to take him apart, Billy can’t get enough of Steve feeling good because of him.

“So finger me like this,” Billy says, and it’s close to begging.

He wants the weight of Steve pushing him down against the ground, trapped and safe between the unforgiving floor and Steve’s warmth.

Steve huffs out a little sound and buries his face against Billy's throat. He ruts there with him like that for another moment, breathing and choking back a groan, fingers flexing over Billy's hips.

“Yeah,” he eventually says, biting at Billy's pulse. “Yeah, okay.”

“Just wanna feel you,” Billy says, enjoying the weight of Steve, his heat. “Like you on top of me.”

It’s not something he’d have admitted five years ago. It’s not something he’d admit to anyone else *now*.

Steve hums and presses down more. “I know the feeling,” he admits.

And then he's reaching for the lube. He's adjusting the way Billy's legs

are sprawled. He's slicking up his fingers and reaching for one of the pillows.

“Lift up,” he says and wedges Billy's hips at an angle before getting a hand around him, wet fingers searching. “Tell me if I need to slow down.”

Billy nods, moving and arching his hips off the ground to give Steve a better angle. It’s not perfect and Steve’s not completely on top of him, but it’s enough.

And it’s certainly enough when one of Steve’s fingers begins working inside of him, pushing in, slick and perfect. Billy nearly chokes with it, hips jerking with the sensation, wanting to press down for *more*.

“*Hey*,” Steve says, slipping an arm under his lower back to keep him steady as he eases him open-- and he rocks pointedly. “I got this. Just lay back and tell me when it's too much.”

Billy groans, rolling his hips a little for Steve’s benefit -- but lets himself still, after a moment. Just allows himself to feel Steve’s finger in him, stretching him, opening him up.

“Bossy,” Billy says, breathing out a ragged little gasp.

Steve grins down at him. “You like it. Sometimes.”

And he does something *fantastic* with his finger-- curls it, just so-- and his grin goes wider when Billy arches. Then, he withdraws, and starts teasing with two deft fingertips.

“I've learned a few tricks, if you hadn't noticed.” Steve says.

And yeah, *jesus*, Steve has. Billy’s panting and aching already. It's fucking unfair, is what it is.

“More, *more*,” Billy begs.

But he doesn’t try and push down on Steve’s fingers, knows that Steve’s got him, that Steve will give him what he needs. Though he does beg for it. Mostly, because he can’t seem to shut his mouth.

Steve kisses him as he presses in. Licks into his mouth with shallow presses of his tongue, just like his fingers, and rolls against him until he's overwhelmed by sensation. Until Steve's curling his tongue against his and he's buried two fingers into him-- wet and hot and *perfect.*

Before too long, Billy's panting, breaking away from the kiss just to *breathe*. Because Steve is magic with those fingers, curling them *just so*, getting Billy's cock to drip between them. He can't help but twist, can't help but rock his hips upward and against Steve's hand as he gets used to it.

"Need you," Billy says. "C'mon, fuck me, baby, *please*."

"Not yet," Steve says, kissing down the bare expanse of his throat-- biting and *marking* as he focuses in on that spot that makes *fire* ignite in Billy's veins. "Not yet. Almost, sweetheart."

Billy whines, high and pleading and shaky. God, Steve is going to *kill* him. Going to have him breaking apart into a thousand pieces before he's even done with Billy.

Steve's fingers make Billy sing, pleasure rolling through him with every press. It's so *much*, Steve milking him like that, making his cock drip onto his stomach like it just won't stop. Like he's *leaking*.

"Baby," Billy gasps, rolling his hips only to see fucking stars. "Jesus -- Steve, fuck. If you don't *stop*," he warns.

"What?" Steve asks, pulling back, just as flush, just as breathless, just as *wanting*-- and he draws his fingers out and presses three in-- *easy, steady, perfect*-- and Billy's body *welcomes* it as Steve curls them and spreads him wide. "You gonna come again for me, sweetheart?"

Billy doesn't think he *can.* And yet.

And yet his body betrays him easily at Steve's request. With three fingers inside he is so full, every inch of him on fire at the pleasure of it. It's perfect. It's so much. It happens all at once, like getting his breath knocked out of him.

He gasps as he comes, Steve's fingers curled *just so*, milking it out of

him as he spills himself onto his belly. Everything is alight with pleasure and Billy's just gasping, groaning, grabbing onto Steve for purchase.

Billy's a mess, mouth a litany of curses and Steve's name, body loose and shaking. And Steve works him through it. Gentles his movements to something almost idle. Peppers kisses over his face. Brings him back down with the utmost care.

“You're like a goddamn work of art,” Steve breathes, mouth pressed to Billy's ear as he holds him steady, as the shakes start to pass. “Fuck, you're so beautiful.”

Dizzy and out of breath, Billy blinks into the dim light of the room, trying to focus. Trying to get his body back from the state Steve left it in.

He only half makes it. With Steve's fingers still in him, with Steve kissing him all over, it's so easy to stay half aware. Strung out. It's blissful.

“C’mon,” Billy murmurs. “Need you inside me. *Please*.”

“You sure?” Steve asks.

It's all Billy can do to just nod. Because he is. Absolutely.

He needs it. Needs Steve.

“Okay,” Steve breathes, lips soft against Billy's. “Okay, sweetheart.”

Then he's pulling his fingers free. Then he's slicking up his length. Then he's pulling Billy closer by the hip, guiding himself in--

And it's exactly what Billy needed. Steve, sliding himself home, steady and careful. Steve, pressing down over him, holding him close as he sinks in until he's home and they're both gasping against each other's mouths and trembling.

“*Billy*,” his name is a broken moan out of Steve's mouth. “God, Billy, you're so-- *fuck*, love this. Love having you like this. Love that you're letting me. Love *you*.”

He's shaking. Rutting, a little, buried deep in Billy. Filling him.

And Billy's lost to bliss. His body is so wrung out that it all feels perfect and it all feels *safe*. Like Steve's hands holding him steady at the rink. Like Steve, an anchor in the storm, always there. He can't get enough of it, of Steve pressing him down and fucking him into the floor.

And if Steve wanted Billy to relax, he's got it now. Billy can barely make a fist in Steve's hair, barely wrap his arms around Steve to keep him close.

Can't even form words. Not like this. It's too good.

Steve groans, resting his forehead to Billy's. He hunts for one of Billy's hands, taking it, clutching it and lacing their fingers together.

He starts moving in earnest, then. Starts rocking with Billy, slow and steady, breathing into Billy's mouth. Gasping and shuddering as he slides home each time.

Foggily, Billy can't help but dwell on how much he missed this. How much he missed Steve's closeness. His warmth.

Billy rolls his hips, arches up, and then he's groaning, Steve pounding into him at the perfect angle. He's so sensitive that every thrust brings a burst of pleasure, that every kiss leaves Billy wanting more.

In the midst of it-- of their passion, their *coupling*-- in the moment between their bodies meeting as one, their hands locked together, fingers laced, Steve presses praise to Billy's skin. Whispers it there, like he's threading it into his bones.

“So good, sweetheart. So good for me, Billy, *god*.” Steve breathes, voice shaking. “Love you. You're so perfect.”

And Billy feels *good*, too. He feels taken care of, cherished. Most importantly, he feels loved. A physical affirmation of the words.

It builds between them, Billy lost with only Steve for an anchor, and Steve, perfect and beautiful as always, holding it all together. Giving Billy exactly what he needs. It seems impossible that he could come

again. And yet.

Yet he's barely aware of himself clawing at Steve's back, of pulling at Steve's hair with renewed strength as his pleasure bends tighter and tighter, until he snaps.

Steve falls apart above him. Following after him. Stuttering to a finish as he drives deep and spills out, Billy's name on his lips.

Billy's orgasm is as quick as a punch to the gut, leaving him gasping, barely able to suck in a good breath of air. However quick, though, it leaves him useless and spent, muscles loose and body tired. When he blinks, he can barely even see -- so he just closes his eyes and lets himself float, comforted by the heavy press of Steve's body on top of him. The familiar weight of someone he loves.

Steve goes heavy over him. Weighs him down perfectly. Seems just as lost as Billy.

Still, he slurs a soft-- "you okay, sweetheart?"-- as he kisses his cheek.

Billy nods and hums, content and happy and absolutely lost to bliss.

It's all he can do to throw an arm around Steve just to show how much he wants to keep him there. Steve seems content enough to give him that, for a while, until the sweat starts to cool on their skin and his air conditioning kicks on again.

Shivering, Steve pulls back, propped on an elbow as he cups Billy's cheek in an open palm. His thumb drags soft lines under Billy's eye.

Everything smells like rosemary.

"We should clean up," he says, once Billy's looking at him.

Steve's still blurry, still out of focus, just like the rest of the world. Is this what Steve feels like when Billy teases him for hours, when Billy wrings orgasms out of him like it's his job?

"In a bit," Billy says. Somewhere between a request and a statement.

"Okay," Steve says, and carefully slides free of him. "Wait here. I'm

gonna get a washcloth and another blanket."

Billy hums something like an affirmative. But once Steve pulls away, once Billy is left without, he feels alone and cold.

When Steve comes back, washcloth and blanket in hand, Billy is already sitting up, trying to blink the haziness from his eyes. Trying to push past the dizziness that Steve left in him.

"Hey," Billy says. "It's cold."

Which it's not, objectively, but he feels a chill on his skin. Like the oil left him more sensitive. Like maybe Steve's hands did, too.

"I know, sweetheart," Steve sits with him, draping the blanket over Billy's shoulders and carefully cleaning off his stomach, his thighs, his spent cock with a warm, wet cloth.

"It's fine," Billy says, batting away the washcloth after a little while, when he deems himself clean enough.

Then, he grabs for Steve and leans backwards, trying to pull Steve back on top of him.

"Come lie down," Billy says, feeling on the edge of sleep, even though they're on the ground. Even though they're in the middle of the living room.

Steve follows with a laugh. He splays out over him, nose pressed to his cheek, and breath warm over his throat.

"Thank you," he mumbles. "For letting me take care of you."

"Should be thanking you," Billy says, the smile on his face bleeding out into his words. Content and happy.

There's not an ounce of stress in him. Steve has left his entire body loose and relaxed, worked free of tension and worry.

"Nah," Steve hums, curling closer. "I wanted to."

Billy barely even notices when Steve fishes the blanket out from

under him, but he does move in closer once they're both covered in it, nosing closer to Steve's neck. It's a small moment, just a little snapshot in a summer full of warmth, but Billy savors it, commits every detail to memory.

"Thank you anyway," Billy says, adoring.

-*-

Billy isn't really a huge fan of malls. They're too packed full of people, to crammed with terrible clothes and bad examples of commercialism. But on a warm, sticky day at the end of July? It's pretty much salvation.

"What about there?" Billy asks, pointing at a random store.

Max makes a face next to him. "Gross. Only *losers* shop there."

Dustin, who is trailing behind the two of them next to Steve and El, makes a noise. "Ok, so Max is starting to sound like Billy. Does anyone else notice that, or is it just me?"

Billy grins like it's a compliment.

The mall hadn't really been a *choice* today. He'd been helping Max pack up for college, trying to cram all her stuff into a trunk, but they'd been stymied early-on with the realization that her clothes were somewhat *lacking*. She had huffed and said it was *fine* in a way that said it was absolutely *not fine*, so Billy had called Steve, who had suggested a trip to the big mall in the city.

"Steve's good at picking things out," El says.

Dustin snorts. "*Steve* is good at picking *expensive* things out."

"Yeah, but you look good, don't you?" Steve teases, bumping his shoulder into Dustin's as El loops her arm around Steve's elbow.

"Yeah," Dustin grumbles. "It helps that he *pays.*"

Max looks at Billy. "Does that mean if you pick stuff, you're gonna pay for my clothes?"

“I think you’re spoiling them,” Billy says at Steve with a roll of his eyes. Then, he turns back to Max. “I’ll *maybe* get you a couple things, but Susan gave you like, a wad of cash. You’re gonna spend that here, on clothes, and not on the arcade.”

When Max huffs, Steve hides a laugh behind his hand.

“I hate shopping,” she mutters.

Steve gestures to another store -- there are records and band tees and torn denim in the window. “That's because you haven't shopped with me. C'mon. We'll all pick an outfit for you to try on, and I'll buy the one you hate the least.”

“*Spoiling*,” Billy murmurs, ignored, as he wanders into the shop behind the rest of them.

Dustin already has five shirts draped over his arm by the time Billy actually starts looking. Max keeps wrinkling up her nose at it all, but she's perusing the racks anyway.

Steve nudges into Billy's side, a jean jacket in hand, and he waggles it. “Interested? I don't *only* have to spoil the kids.”

The jacket is like a blast from the past.

Billy’s old one, the one he’d brought to California with him years ago had been lost to the ages. It’s something he endlessly regrets, that he hadn’t kept better track of it.

When he shrugs it on, the denim feels so familiar on his skin.

“How do I look, pretty boy?” Billy asks, trying for his best impersonation of himself, years ago.

Steve's eyes slide down over him, slow and creeping and hot like a touch, before dragging back up. “Like you're about to deck me. Or drag me somewhere private to make out. In other words: good. Real good.”

Billy steps forward. He makes a fist and then raises his hand, reaching out until he’s dragging his knuckles slow along Steve’s jaw.

Pulling at the bit of stubble there, following the perfect angle of Steve's face.

"That so?" Billy asks, voice low.

Steve shudders, heavy and heady, and Billy doesn't miss the way his breath catches. The way his eyes go *dark*.

"Yeah," he says. "You're definitely getting that jacket."

"What, you gonna spoil *me*?" Billy asks, taking another step closer to Steve, just so he can get a better look at those eyes.

"Every chance I get," Steve says, reaching out to pluck at the collar, fingers smoothing down the denim. "Got a problem with that?"

Billy's heart kickstarts in his chest, pounding against his ribcage in the best possible way.

"Not at all, baby," Billy purrs, feeling hot and dizzy underneath even the gentlest of Steve's touches.

"*Guys*," Dustin says, a few feet to their left. "We are in *public*."

Steve barks out a laugh, moment broken, and he rests his forehead against Billy's shoulder as his shoulders shake with his mirth.

Billy lets Steve laugh for a bit, then pulls him back so that he can drape an arm over his shoulder and guide him toward the shirts, jean jacket still on.

"You think I can convince you into any of this?" he asks, nodding at the black band tees around them. "Or do you just like putting on my dirty ones you find on the floor of your room?"

Which Billy can't even argue with. He loves the look of Steve in his shirts, loves the way when he pulls in close, Steve smells like him.

"You trying to dress me, now?" Steve asks, brows up, but he fingers through some of the shirts idly -- threadbare, soft, and worn in a way that's supposed to be *in* now. Grunge.

Thank god for Kurt Cobain.

Billy hums. “I think I prefer you trying to dress me.”

Because Billy, if he got his way, would dress Steve in absolutely nothing other than a button-down with one button done up.

“Good,” Steve plucks up a shirt, *Van Halen* on the front, and pushes it at Billy's chest. “Means I can keep stealing from you.”

“Dork,” Billy says, holding the shirt up to himself. It’s weird, how soft it is, how easily the fabric folds under his hands. Not unwelcome, but strange, as most of his shirts became that way through wear and tear. “You trying to relive some of our high school days?” Billy asks, glancing down at the shirt. Not that he *doesn’t* dress like this, still -- but less frequently, now. He’s a bit more *boring*.

“Why? You interested?” Steve asks, grin coy.

Billy raises his eyebrows. It’s not really something he’s ever thought about much. He wasn’t exactly *kind*, back in the day.

“Dunno. Keep talking,” Billy says, ushering Steve away from prying ears, deep into the corner of the store.

Steve laughs and follows, picking up a few things -- for Max, for Billy-- as they go. He pokes around at some jean, artfully torn and stained, and glances at Billy.

“Sometimes I think about that party on Halloween,” Steve says. “When you stomped up to me and threw down the gauntlet. And I think about how different it could've been if I hadn't been with Nancy and had known you already wanted in my pants by then.”

Billy breathes a little heavy. “Yeah?”

The thought is a hot one, visceral as it hits him. Strangely, he hadn’t *thought* about something like that. But Steve? Clearly has. And that’s something, in and of itself, too.

Steve smiles. “Yeah. Might've been charmed, even, by your obvious peacocking.”

Billy licks his lips. “What, you think I was trying to show off for you?”

Steve isn’t *wrong*. But Billy’s feelings had been all kinds of complicated, back then.

“Maybe,” Steve shrugs. “You certainly made a point of tracking me down. What would you have done, I wonder, if I'd let you catch me back then?”

Billy’s mouth waters.

He takes a step closer to Steve. “Don’t know,” he says, slow. “Maybe we should find out?”

“And how do you propose we do that?”

Billy rolls his shoulders a little, an easy shrug. “A couple shots of real shitty vodka and some kool-aid punch would probably do a pretty good job of putting me in the right mindset,” he offers. “If you’re interested.”

He doesn’t *really* know why he’s offering, because it sounds a little silly and a little crazy -- but it also sounds kinda *fun*, too.

“If you doubt in my interest now, I'm obviously not doing a good enough job showing you,” Steve says, a hand sneaking under Billy's jacket to fan out over his ribcage.

Steve’s hand is warm and his fingers move when Billy takes in a shuddering breath.

“Maybe I just like hearing about how much you’re into me,” Billy grins.

Steve laughs, leaning into him. “I'm very into you, Billy. If it were just me and you -- no teenagers -- I'd drag you into one of those dressing rooms. Proof enough?”

Billy leans back, smile a mile wide. “Definitely.” He glances over at where they’re all milling, eyes narrowing a little. “Ugh. I *guess* I can wait until we’re home to get my hands all over you.”

“And maybe that jean jacket on me, too.” Steve says, grinning, pulling away with an armful of options for Max.

“You’ll have to pry it off of me,” Billy warns, but follows Steve toward the group of kids, feeling a lot like he won something good.

Steve glances back at him, over his shoulder, eyes still dark with promise and smile lazy -- and suddenly Billy thinks all Steve will have to do is bat his pretty eyes at him.

“Like you wouldn't love me in nothing but your jacket,” Steve says, grinning as Billy’s ears pinken, and then turns to the kids as they walk up. “Fashion show time, kiddo. Move it.”

Max groans, but she looks intrigued by the items in Steve’s arms, so she grabs them and disappears into a fitting room, El slipping in behind her while Steve, Dustin, and Billy all get comfortable outside.

They spend the next hour watching Max parade out in outfit after outfit. Dustin creates a quick and efficient judgement scale -- giving a thumbs up or a thumbs down for everything she wears, which Steve quickly adopts, laughing the whole time.

By the time they're done, Max has a number of new outfits fit for California sunshine, and a jacket that looks eerily like the one Steve insists on paying for for Billy.

Billy buys that one for her, wrenching it out of Steve’s hands. He buys a pin for it, too, and sticks it on the collar. Def Leppard, just in case anyone at her new school thinks they have *better* music taste than anyone Billy’s related to.

“Thanks,” she says, nose wrinkled, but there's a pleased little smile on her face.

On their way out the door, Dustin starts making moon eyes at a comic shop. Steve shakes his head.

“Food court first, dweeb.”

The food court pizza is terrible, but Billy’s hungry enough to eat a horse, so he plows through three pieces before he’s done -- and steals

the pepperoni off of Max's, before El plucks one of them out of his hand with her *mind*. Then, Billy decides he's done and Max gets to eat her last few slices.

"You didn't get anything," Billy says, nudging at Steve's foot with one of his own. "You have any places you wanna hit up?"

"I actually need to pick up a watch," Steve says. "Dropped it off a while back for repairs. Wanna ditch the kids at the comic shop and come with?"

"Sure," Billy agrees. "Though that's not very *exciting*."

If Billy had more cash to spare, he'd buy Steve something nice.

"It's a nice watch," Steve says. "Very exciting."

Billy laughs and gives in. "Sure, baby. The most exciting."

Once they drop the kids off at the comic store, Billy slings an arm over Steve's shoulders, stealing the inches when he can, when he's wearing boots and Steve's wearing loafers.

"Where to, King Steve?"

"Second floor and around the corner," Steve says, but he's tucked a hand into Billy's jean jacket and he's leading him toward an escalator.

The jewellery shop Steve had his watch prepared at is practically empty, save a man in a suit dallying over the displays and a couple peering at rings. The older man behind the counter tells Steve it will be a few minutes, so they start looking around.

When they end up stopped at a display of diamond rings and gold bands, Steve huffs out a laugh and taps his finger to the glass.

"Did you know I thought I'd marry Nancy?" he asks.

"Really?" Billy asks, eyes on Steve and not on the rings. "King Steve the big softie, huh?"

"Yeah, well," Steve shrugs a shoulder. "That was before --

everything.”

“Well, you were still together after the first, uh, time, right?” Billy asks. “Did you still think so, then?”

“More so,” Steve nods. “We'd been through hell together. I thought nothing could break us apart. Then, things hit the fan again, and there was Jonathan. But there was always kind of Jonathan.”

Billy nods. “Sucks,” he says.

He doesn't really know that kind of heartbreak. The only person his heart has ever truly ached for was Steve.

“At the time,” Steve agrees. “But looking back, I'm glad I didn't. Marry Nancy, I mean.”

“Well I’m glad you didn’t either, for what it’s worth,” Billy says.

Steve's nose wrinkles up. “Yeah, that would make this --” he gestures between them with a lazy hand “-- a little messy.”

Billy laughs, and turns his eyes to the rings below them. “Yeah, probably.” He eyes a few of the rings, way too gaudy, really. And kind of ugly, too. “I never really figured I’d get married,” Billy says, after a little while.

“No?” Steve asks, tilting his head, following Billy’s gaze.

“Well, I mean, it’s kinda *illegal*,” Billy says. Because he’s known for a long time that he was never going to end up with a woman.

“Oh,” Steve breathes, then blushes. “Right. But you never -- I mean, if you could, would you?”

Billy bites at his lip, worrying it between his teeth a bit. “I don’t think about it much. Seems kinda silly to daydream about something I don’t get to have, you know?” Then, he shrugs. “It’s not that I wouldn’t. Don’t get me wrong. But I just don’t see it happening -- the world’s a pretty unfair place.”

Steve hums. Then he taps the glass and calls for one of the girls

behind the counter.

“The silver, please.” Steve says, smiling as she pulls it out, and plucking it up between his fingers -- it's simple, with little engravings around the band that look like Celtic knotting.

Then he holds out an open palm to Billy.

Billy puts his hand in Steve's, fingers warm against Steve's skin. Then, he looks at Steve and raises his eyebrow.

Carefully, Steve slides the ring onto his finger, until it's sitting comfortably. The silver looks nice, against his skin, and Steve thumbs over the shine of it with a thoughtful hum.

“It looks good,” Steve says.

It takes Billy a second to realize he hasn’t said anything, that he can’t find words. His tongue feels a little big in his mouth.

He flexes his fingers.

It *does* look good.

And it looks weird, too. Like something he had never allowed himself to imagine, before.

Steve tilts his head. “Would you prefer gold?”

Billy swallows. “I mean -- I don’t really have a preference.”

He’s not really sure what Steve is *doing*. What his angle is. There’s a part of Billy, one a little larger than he’d casually admit to, that wonders if Steve would want this with him, if Steve would want *forever* with Billy. Then, there’s the other part, the louder part that’s easier to hold onto, that says it *doesn’t matter*, because Billy doesn’t get to have this, regardless.

Steve's eyes narrow, playful and bright. “You've worn rings before. I remember them in high school.”

“Maybe gold?” Billy hears himself say.

Steve turns to look at the girl behind the counter. “Do you have any Cartier? Gold, preferably.”

She blinks and then nods, smile small as she pulls out three boxes from the locked case, setting them down on the glass top. Steve pulls the silver free of Billy’s finger and offers it back, before sliding one of the simple gold bands closer.

“Try one,” Steve says.

Billy wants to ask *why*? Wants to push it back at Steve because he doesn’t understand. He feels *uncomfortable* here, like everyone’s looking at them, like they *know* he doesn’t get to have this.

But he puts the ring on his finger anyway and bites his lip when he looks down, teeth pressing against tender flesh.

“It’s a ring,” he makes himself say.

“Billy,” Steve says, almost like he's sighing, and he plucks up one of the others -- thinner, perhaps more delicate-- and slides it onto his own finger. “You know, when Nancy first went off to college, she called me one night in a haze of midterm madness to rant about the *absurdity of societal pressure* to get a couple of certificates signed simply so you and your significant other could share taxes.”

Billy’s cheeks feel warm and so do his ears, like he’s flush with a fever. Like he’s been out in the sun for a little too long. Even in the cold air conditioning of the mall he feels warm and stuffy and too big for his own skin.

“Okay?” Billy says, eyes on Steve’s hand, on the ring that’s now sitting there, the one that matches his own.

Steve glances at him, and then down at the gold band on his finger. “She was taking this civil rights course -- mostly, it was about women and race and stuff like that. But there was a section on gay rights, apparently her professor was a lesbian and real loud about it, and Nancy wouldn't shut up about the legal ramifications of getting married with a wedding certificate. I guess it's something a lot of people struggled with -- wanting the wedding without the legality.

The promise to each other more important than the promise to the government."

Steve's lips press thin and he turns the ring on his finger before turning to Billy again, taking his hand, and squeezing.

"You can't get married -- not yet, anyway, though there's plenty of push for that in some places." Steve says. "But that doesn't mean you can't have this."

He brings Billy's hand up, the one in his, the one with the ring glinting gold in the dim light. He squeezes at his fingers and presses a kiss to the curl of his knuckle.

"You can have this, Billy. If you want it. There are -- I'm not great on details, I've never been the smartest guy in a room, but… I know you and I know if you think you can't have it, then you won't think about it, and maybe you won't *want it*. But that's not how it works." Steve pauses, eyes soft and smile softer. "You *can* have it. You just might not get a stupid piece of paper with it."

"You're plenty smart," Billy says, because he's not sure what *else* to say.

It's a lot to process, weirdly.

Billy runs his thumb over the smooth metal on his finger. He hasn't worn rings since high school, really. Took them off to work in the shop and then never got back into it, again.

Steve snorts, and goes to slide the ring on his own finger off. "Hardly."

Before Steve can move any further, Billy reaches out for his hand and interlocks their fingers. "Hey. You are."

Billy looks down, at their interwoven fingers, at the gold bands shining on both of their hands. It looks *good*, he thinks. The kind of good where his stomach feels like it's trying to turn over, like he's on a roller coaster or driving too fast.

Steve goes still, shuddering out a breath, and he glances down at

their hands with an odd smile.

“You're biased,” Steve says, after a moment.

Billy doesn’t know if Steve wants this with him, but suddenly, Billy finds it kind of impossible *not* to imagine it.

“Yeah, maybe a little,” Billy says with a hum. He squeezes Steve’s hand. “Gold looks good on you.”

Steve smiles. “You, too.”

“Guess we should probably take them off, huh?” Billy says, sliding his hand free from Steve’s, missing the warmth immediately.

“Probably,” Steve says, hesitating long enough to drag a thumb over the gold. “Unless you want to throw down a thousand dollars on a ring?”

Billy laughs, because that’s just about all he can do. “Yeah, definitely not.”

He has way more questions than he did earlier, something confused sitting in the pit of his stomach, but laughter does a good job of easing it, of smoothing it all down. So he slides the ring off and sets it in Steve’s palm, pressing it into warm skin.

Steve's fingers curl over it, and he turns back to the display to set their rings back in their boxes. It's odd, watching the rings be packed away again, and Billy’s bare finger, and Steve's.

“It's a nice thought, though.” Steve says.

Billy wants to ask if Steve means *in general,* or -- his head spins at the thought of more.

It’s not that he’s never thought about this lasting, but Billy generally tries to live his life not looking too far into the future. He can barely think about the end of summer, about what they’re going to *do* -- the thought of *forever* is a little daunting. Maybe more so because he’s got no damn idea how Steve feels. The last time they *really* talked about it, Steve had seemed unsure about the end of August, brittle and a

little hostile. Billy hasn't brought it up, since.

"Uh huh," Billy says.

"Mr. Harrington?" The man from earlier calls for them. "Your watch is ready."

Steve gives the girl behind the counter a smile, then brushes by Billy, leaving him at the display as he goes to pay.

-*-

"You know, the leather was always a good look," Steve tells him, standing in front the mirror on his closet door, Billy's new jean jacket big on his shoulders, tags still hanging from the collar and the left sleeve.

Billy keeps thinking about his hand with a ring on it. Keeps thinking about Steve looking at him and telling him what he can have-- if he was just brave enough to reach out and take it. Brave in a way he wasn't back in high school. Brave in a way he's never really been.

Steve looks over his shoulder at him. Billy's got his elbows on his knees, still got his boots on, and his eyes on Steve. Steve smiles.

"I always kind of liked the denim on denim look better," Steve says, and Billy thinks about a different world-- maybe a better world-- where Steve Harrington walked around Hawkins high school with Billy's jean jacket on for that last, long year.

He thinks about Steve's smile, then and now, and feels haunted by the ghost of could-have-beens. Doesn't know what to do in the face of it, of Steve standing there in his jacket, of the night they met like a grainy rerun in his head. Of a memory, a hope, to have *all* of Steve-- instead of the summer where he had some of him and then none of him.

When he doesn't reply, Steve frowns and turns to face him. He holds his arms out.

"What, it's not a good look on me?" he asks.

“It looks perfect on you,” Billy says. Because it does. Because of everything.

He looks like he is Steve's. That Steve is *his.*

And that's all that Billy needs.

“But,” Billy says with a grin. Trying to push past regret. “It *would* look better on me.”

Steve's brow arches. “Well, I think we already knew *that.*”

“You gonna give it back to me, baby?”

Billy slides off Steve's bed and stands, taking a step toward Steve. A little threatening in a old, familiar way.

Steve eyes him, gaze following the line of his shoulders, and then tracking over his face. His lips purse like he's trying not to grin.

“You gonna ask *nicely,* sweetheart?”

Billy *does* grin. He lets himself, feeling it slowly take over his face.

He hums, like he's trying to think about it. Debating it and all the other possibilities.

“Pretty please,” Billy finally says. “I promise I'll make it up to you, even. Because I'm nice like that.”

“Make it up to me, huh?” Steve says, already shrugging out of the jacket, letting it slide off slow, before holding it out-- making Billy come to him to grab it. “How exactly are you gonna do that?”

Billy thinks about the way Steve’s eyes had gone a little dark when Billy had suggested he was trying to relive their high school days. He thinks about just how easily they both could’ve had what they wanted, so much *earlier*.

He takes a step forward.

Offers his hand out.

“I think we’re gonna need a few drinks in us, first.”

Authenticity, and all.

Steve's eyes narrow, but his smile doesn't waver. He passes the jacket over.

“What are you up to?”

Billy tugs his shirt over his head before he slides the jacket over his shoulders. It’s not his old leather one, but it’ll work, Billy thinks.

From the look on Steve’s face, it’ll *definitely* do.

Billy takes a step back, a step toward the door. “Come on, Harrington. I heard you have a big old stash of booze at this place of yours. Aren’t you going to hook me up?”

Steve blinks at him, and then his grin stretches *wide*. “Did Tommy tell you that?”

And that? That’s what Billy *needs*. Fired up and absolutely delighted, Billy’s heartbeat skips in his chest. Pounding hard, blood rushing.

“Maybe he did,” Billy says. “But *shh* -- I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.”

“Tommy's got a big mouth,” Steve says, trailing after him. “What *else* did he tell you?”

They end up in Steve’s kitchen.

In Steve’s parents’ kitchen.

“A lotta things,” Billy says, swiping his tongue over his lips. “That you got a real expensive record player, for one. And that your parents would probably be out of town, too.”

“What, did you wanna throw a party?” Steve asks, pulling out a bottle from one of the cabinets-- whiskey, by the looks of it-- and swinging himself up into the counter. “Awful fucking presumptuous of you, Hargrove. We just met.”

Billy prowls closer and snatches the bottle right out of Steve's hands. Then, he takes a sip, eyes never leaving Steve's.

"I'm told I throw a good party. Why, are you not interested, Harrington?"

Steve watches him swallow when he takes another swig. "Now, I didn't say *that*."

And the heat in Steve's eyes promises so much. Billy tries to remember if Steve looked at him like that the night of the party.

He hopes he did.

Then again, it doesn't really matter, because Steve's looking at him like that *now*.

"I thought you might've been all *partied out*," Billy says. "Considering you're all holed up by your lonesome in this mansion of yours."

Eventually, when he likes the level of numbness at the back of his throat, he passes the bottle back.

When Steve grabs for it, Billy doesn't let go. Steve gives a little pull. Tests to see what Billy's willing to give.

It isn't much.

"It was kind of a wild night," Steve says, eyes bright with the challenge. "My girlfriend basically dumped me and this asshole kept trying to get in my face like he wanted something."

"*Basically dumped*," Billy says, parroting it back before running a thoughtful tongue over his lips. "How's *that* one work, huh?"

Eventually, Billy lets the bottle go, but not before brushing his fingers against Steve's as he does.

"You trying to find out if I'm single?" Steve asks, and he tips his head back, swallowing a mouthful, fingers loose around the neck of the bottle; he hisses when he finishes, nose wrinkling up.

“You need me to get you a chaser for that, pretty boy?” Billy asks. “I wouldn’t want you to burn the back of your throat.”

Steve snorts. “That's not an answer, Hargrove.”

“Well,” Billy says, word twisting around in his mouth. “Word on the street is she dumped you. That Hawkins’ *most eligible* is back on the market. It's big news, apparently.”

Steve hums, tilting his head. “Big news. And what do you think? Do I look like I was dumped?”

Billy hums back. Then, he reaches out for the bottle, fingers over Steve's. Stepping up into his space, even though Steve's taller, sitting up on the kitchen counter.

“You look like you could use a good night,” Billy says.

Because Steve *had* looked dumped, had looked a wreck. And Billy always wondered what would've happened if he had offered himself up.

Steve doesn't let the bottle go. Takes another pull, in fact, eyes on Billy's.

“That an offer?” he asks.

But Billy doesn't let go later. When Steve pulls, the movement drags Billy into his space, until he's pressed against the counter and between Steve's spread knees.

“Could be,” Billy says carefully. Because he would have been so hesitant, so cautious about this. But that's hunger burning in Steve's eyes and it fuels Billy on.

Steve hums again, and his eyes stray. Away from Billy's and to his mouth. Along his jaw. Down his chest.

His knees come together. Giving a little squeeze at Billy's waist, before easing away again. Something sweet and reassuring that contrasts with the game they're playing.

“And what, exactly, are you offering, Hargrove?”

And it’s not like Billy doesn’t *know* that this is *his* Steve. But there’s something about trying to put himself back in the mentality of high school that’s a little disarming. Something that makes him more cautious than he is now. The reassurance helps.

It eggs him on.

Billy leans in a little closer, gets as up in Steve’s face as possible. “Well, that’s up to *you*.” Billy drops his eyes to Steve’s lips and licks his own.

Steve shudders. His lips part and he lets out a breath, sways like he might lean in and *take*.

Instead, he takes Billy by the wrist, eyes on his as he pulls the bottle free from his grip. As he takes another drink. As he sets the bottle aside.

“I think I figured out what I want as my chaser,” Steve says, voice rough from the burn of whiskey, and he dips down to steal a kiss from Billy's lips.

The alcohol tastes harsh and bitter on Steve’s lips, but Billy laps it up anyway. It’s something to savor, but Billy keeps it a little rough, a little heated. Because, back in the day, that’s how Billy would’ve done it.

It’s fast. Just a stolen kiss between two people full of passion. But, as fast as it is, when Billy pulls back he’s a little out of breath anyway.

“Hell of a chaser,” Billy says. He presses a little closer. Goes up on his toes. “Bold of you to assume I wouldn’t just deck you.”

Billy braces his hands on either side of Steve’s hips.

“Bold of you to assume I would mind either way,” Steve says, just as breathless, and he shrugs a shoulder. “Fighting or fucking. Both seem like pretty good options.”

“Well,” Billy says, leaning in until he can feel Steve’s breath on his

lips. Close enough that he can smell the whisky shared between the two of them. “My knuckles are already pretty bruised, so.”

Billy closes the gap, presses in until his lips are on Steve’s again. It’s a deeper kiss this time, more hungry now that he knows that this is an *option*. It feels like his chest is on fire, something alight inside of him at the thought that he can *have* this. That he can taste and touch. It’s addictive, really. Thrilling, too.

Better than any fight.

Steve *moans* against his lips. Welcomes him deeper. Spreads his legs and welcomes him there, too.

Billy gets his hands on Steve’s hips, sliding around to his ass, and yanks him forward. Pulling him flush with Billy as best as he can be, even if it means Billy has to stand a little taller, wobbling a bit on his toes.

Past the alcohol, Steve tastes sweet. His tongue is hot and soft and it makes Billy shudder and shake against him.

“Fuck,” Billy groans against his lips, grabbing Steve’s ass rough through his jeans.

Steve hisses, draws back and leaves a trail of bites along Billy's jaw as he sinks a hand into his hair and *pulls*. Sharpens the sting of it with another kiss, biting and licking his way into Billy's mouth.

Billy flat out *groans* when Steve gets a hand in his hair, kissing back harder before he pulls away, biting at Steve's lip as he does.

“Not as much a prude as I figured,” Billy says, pleased that Steve's got the bite and the heat that he had always hoped was there.

“Did Tommy tell you that, too?” Steve asks, but he's already dipping his head to mouth at Billy's throat.

“No,” Billy says, gasp escaping from his throat as Steve’s teeth slide over his jugular. His fingers tighten over Steve’s ass. “Figured they grow them that way in small towns. Figured you’d be more likely to punch me in the face.”

Steve hums against his pulse, tightens his legs around his waist. “Would you like me to?”

“I think I can put those hands to better use. Besides, I think I like them in my hair.”

If anyone else tried to get their hands in Billy's hair, he'd probably punch them. With Steve, he just wants *more*.

Steve cards his fingers slow, sweet, careful through his curls. A contrast to everything else about this. He pulls back and meets his gaze and his pupils are dark, dark, *dark*.

“And what else would you like?”

So fucking much, Billy thinks.

Billy pulls back a bit, lets himself get a good look at Steve. His eyes trail down Steve, from his lips to his neck to his torso. And then down, to where his cock is straining at his jeans.

Carefully and slowly, giving Steve a chance to bat him away if he wants to, Billy moves his hand. He nearly gasps when he runs his palm over the bulge in Steve's pants, when he presses down.

Steve does gasp. His hips lurch and he grips Billy's shoulder. His eyes are wide and his mouth hangs open.

“*Jesus*,” Steve breathes.

And good. Steve doesn’t slap him. Doesn’t even push his hand away.

Billy *grins*, wide and devious, like he’s won something -- which, to some extent, he has.

“Yeah, you like that?” Billy asks, grinding his palm down when Steve squirms. “Fuck, you’re big.”

Steve chokes back a sound, hand flying to Billy's wrist, and he squeezes. Stills him.

“Billy,” he says, voice low with warning, breath coming short when

Billy strokes his thumb over the fly if his jeans. “Are you trying to make me cream my pants?”

“Well,” Billy says, drawing out the word, leaning in to punctuate it with another blazing kiss. He finds the head of Steve’s cock and plays with it, running his nails over the bulge of it under the jeans. “I didn’t think you’d be *that* needy for it. But I’ve got all night, pretty boy. Don’t think I’ll get too bored of playing with you, will I?”

Steve rocks into his touch, but his eyes are narrowed, sharp, sure. “Is that what you want? To play with me?”

And well, five years ago, Billy thought they’d just play around. Even though he’d always wanted more.

“Baby,” Billy says, “of *course* I wanna play with you. All fucking night. Tomorrow, too, if I haven’t worn you too thin. And then, if you want more, you come find me again.” He grinds his palm down. “After all, I don’t want to be just a *rebound*, huh?”

Steve moans, eyes falling shut, head hanging forward as he squirms. He clutches at Billy's wrist, at his shoulder, and huffs out a little sound.

“I guess we'll just have to see if you're good enough for me to want more,” Steve says, voice tight.

With the way Steve’s squirming, with the way he’s breathing and moaning?

“Pretty sure I will be,” Billy says, playing with Steve’s cock head with his thumb.

Steve's eyes are bright when they meet his again. “We’ll see.”

A challenge. A gauntlet thrown down between them.

It's as good as blanket permission.

Billy tips forward, gets his palm on Steve’s length again, gets all up in his face. Breathes his air. Gets close enough to his lips to kiss, but doesn’t. He does, however, lick over Steve’s lower lip, just to hear

him gasp.

It's enough, apparently, to coax a little force back out of him. Steve's hands fist into the lapels of his jacket and reel him closer. He catches his mouth and licks his way past Billy's teeth, just to prove that he can, and anchors a heel to the back of Billy's thigh-- keeping him flush.

Billy grinds down, working up a rhythm. Moving in a way that makes Steve louder, brings him closer and closer. Licks into his mouth, just to catch all of the delicious noises Steve makes.

Steve works against him in reply. Meets his touch, his movements, until they're both gasping between kisses. Paws at the skin of his chest, clutches at his sides, and rocks in a desperate way Billy had only *dreamed* about when they were younger.

And *god*, Billy is so hard. It's all he can do to just grind against the counter while he palms Steve, while he kisses him. Ravenous.

"You gonna come for me, pretty boy?" Billy kisses him again, messy. So messy. "Want you to come for me, baby."

Steve jerks against his hand, panting against his mouth as Billy works him, teases him, palms him closer and closer to completion. He whines, nails blunt on the ladder of Billy's ribs, and he rocks as he pants into Billy's mouth and *arches* as he comes.

His eyes are wide, wild, *dark* as he finishes rutting through his orgasm. As he presses forward and hides a burning cheek against one of Billy's, breath hot at his ear. As his hands flex and relax against Billy's skin.

Billy gives him a moment. Gives the two of them a moment, to just breathe each other in, to savor the closeness, before he pulls back. The old familiar grin finds its home on his face once again.

"Jesus, you're fun to play with," Billy says.

He rocks his hands over Steve's spent cock a bit more, *just* to see Steve squirm. Just to coax a couple extra noises out of him.

“Good start to a party?” Billy asks.

Steve's eyes flutter shut, but not before Billy sees them roll back briefly. He digs his heel in at the back of Billy's thigh in retaliation.

His breath hitches before he can manage a reply. “Had better.”

And that only makes Billy grin wider.

“Yeah? Is that so?”

And then he scoops Steve, pulling him close, hands under his ass before he steps back from the counter with Steve wrapped around his waist. It earns him a sharp laugh as Steve rushes to balance himself with his hands on Billy's shoulders.

Earns him a soft smile, too, that doesn't fit with anything they're doing-- but when Steve presses a brief, fleeting kiss to the corner of Billy's mouth, raw with affection, he can't bring himself to complain.

“You're a caveman,” Steve tells him.

“Well, apparently I’ve got something to prove,” Billy says. Then, he stops. “Which way’s your room, pretty boy. If I’m really going to show you a better time than these Hawkins’ girls, you’ll probably want to be comfortable, first.”

“Upstairs,” Steve says, shifting against him, reaching back to snag the whiskey off the counter. “Big room at the end of the hall. Can't miss it.”

“Good thinking,” Billy says, nodding at the whiskey. Because he’d like a little more of that, too, just to help channel his inner high school Billy.

Steve’s legs tighten around his waist when Billy hauls ass up the stairs. When they get to the room that surely must be Steve’s, Billy pushes inside and pauses to take a second to look around. He whistles, low and annoying.

“So, you really are royalty, huh? With a bed like that, I should be calling you *princess*,” Billy says.

Steve dips down to nip at his lower lip. “Don't even think about it.”

Billy grins into it, enjoying the feeling of teeth against skin. The piercing, slight pain of it. The *threat*.

“Hmm,” Billy says, debating it. “Nah, I think I *like* it, princess.”

“*Billy*,” Steve warns, but his face is red and his lips are pursed and his eyes are bright.

And Billy thinks Steve might actually *like* that, which is -- well, it's something to remember for the future, too.

“So,” Billy says, walking them closer to the bed, so ready to toss Steve down on it. “Should I be treating you like royalty tonight?” He snags a kiss. “Or should I be debasing you royally?”

“And here I thought you were playing with me,” Steve says, knocking the bottle playfully against Billy's back. “So, I guess it's up to you. What do *you* want to do with me?”

Billy hums, real considering.

“I think I want a little bit of both,” he says, before leaning down to deposit Steve onto his back on the bed.

Real slow, so that Billy can spread himself out on top of Steve. So that he can press him down and follow it up with a kiss.

Steve hitches his legs up to make more space for him. He melts beneath him, goes perfectly pliant and trusting, humming as Billy feeds him kiss after kiss. He drags his fingers through Billy's hair with one hand, and balances the whiskey in the other.

“A little of both sounds good,” Steve says, pulling back enough to take a long pull from the bottle.

Billy steals it from him. Takes a swig. Sets the bottle aside. Swallows.

Then, he leans down to taste it on Steve's tongue. To share the taste on his own.

Eventually Billy has to pull back from the kiss just to breathe. He takes Steve's chin in his hand, just to get a good look at him.

“Such a pretty princess. Bet you'd look real good riding my cock, huh?”

Steve's face *burns* under his gaze and his touch. His throat works and he shudders.

Billy would be able to recognize arousal on Steve's face from a mile away.

Still, Steve wets his lips and tightens his legs around him. “I'd ride you till your eyes rolled back and you forgot your own name.”

“Yeah?” Billy asks, taking the time to grind his hips down real slow, knowing Steve must be shamefully uncomfortable in his jeans. “And where'd you hear that, huh? All the girls say that to you, or am I not the first guy to have you?”

Steve rides it out with a groan, rocking with him, the tips of his ears red as he gasps. He clutches at Billy's shoulders as they move, slow, together, and looks up at him from beneath his lashes.

“Which would you prefer?” Steve asks, breathless and perfect. “Want me to know what I'm doing? Or did you want to pop my cherry?”

The *again* goes unsaid.

“I'd prefer the truth,” Billy says carefully. He catches Steve's bottom lip in his teeth and then lets go. “That you're all talk, that you're gonna nearly cry at how good I'm gonna make you feel, at how full you're gonna be with me.”

Steve cranes up, trying to catch his mouth again. When Billy doesn't let him, he whines.

“All talk,” Steve says. “Be gentle.”

“Of course I'll be gentle, baby,” Billy says, grinding down. Teasing Steve with the prospect of another kiss but not quite giving in. “I'll be so gentle you'll be begging for more.”

Steve huffs and slumps back. “Sure I won't be begging out of impatience? Boredom, maybe?”

“Jesus, you're a brat,” Billy says, leaning down to get Steve's neck with a bite.

Then, he pulls back so he can start working on the buttons on Steve's shirt. When it's off, tugged unceremoniously to the ground, Billy runs his hands down Steve's chest, plucks at his nipples just to see him squirm.

Steve arches and then trembles back down with a mewl. He's sensitive-- always is, but with whiskey on his breath, he seems even more so. He shoves at Billy's shoulders when he doesn't relent, cursing under his breath, and writhing over the sheets.

“If you're gonna act like a brat,” Billy warns.

Then, he leans down to get his teeth on sensitive skin. Steve curves up, a half cry of a sound escaping him.

He tangles a hand into the hair at the back of Billy's head and tugs. “*Stop* that.”

The tug is a promise and Billy loves it. It only makes him go harder. More fired up.

He pins Steve down with renewed force, fingers starting to work on his jeans while his teeth don't let up, playing with the nubs of sensitive flesh between them, tongue getting in on the action to tease, too.

“Billy,” Steve says, high and shaking, pulling at his hair, clawing at his shoulder, half hard as Billy shoves his pants down over his hips, breath hitching in his chest. “*Billy.*”

“What is it, *princess?*” Billy asks pausing for only a moment to admire the naked body laid bare before him. “Jesus, look at you. You're something else.”

He palms over the meat of Steve's thighs, touch changing until his blunt fingernails are running over sensitive skin. Steve sucks in a

sharp breath, wiggling under the touch, under his gaze.

“*Fuck*,” he breathes, going for Billy's wrists, trying to slow the overstimulation, eyes half dazed already. “I forgot how evil you are.”

Billy doesn't let him.

After all, he promised a party. “And here I thought you'd had better.”

He draws his hand up, till he’s cupping over the soft skin of Steve's balls, playing with them, pulling his nails teasingly over them.

Steve jolts. His jaw flexes as he swallows down a moan, straining up and then collapsing back.

“*Billy*,” he whines, pulling at his wrists, weak under the blitz of pleasure.

“Do you want my mouth on you, baby? You want me to treat you like a princess?” Billy asks, leaning down to kiss at Steve's stomach. The flat plane of him. Savoring the way his breathing hitched as Billy presses a messy, open-mouthed kiss to his hip.

Steve's eyes flutter and his head jerks in an aborted nod. “*Yes*.”

Billy gives it to him. Because he's kind like that. Because his teenage self would've given anything to get his mouth on Steve like this.

He takes it all in one go, eager and a little messy. And definitely depraved.

Billy gets his hands under Steve, because he loves that ass, wants his hands on it to urge Steve up, to get him bucking into Billy's mouth, into his throat. Steve's fingers fist into his hair, into the denim of his nice, new jacket. He groans, thighs trembling, and his hips lurch up into the heat of Billy's mouth.

He's saying *yes*, over and over, under his breath, seeking pleasure in a way he wouldn't have when they were younger. When he was too nervous to demand the way he does now.

It's heady and sinful. The way he moans, wanton and breathless,

straining to seek pleasure. The way he *moves*, greedy for more.

Billy works him over, gets him writhing, gets him nearly fucking *screaming* as he swallows around him.

And then he pulls off. Lapping at his lips with a wet grin, fingers going back to idly playing with Steve's balls.

“Jesus you make a lot of noise, princess.”

Steve practically bares his teeth. He gives a savage pull at his hair, at his jacket, eyes bright in the dim light.

“Billy, I swear to *god*--”

At those fingers, at those fucking *teeth*, Billy groans.

It's better than he ever imagined.

“You're gonna wanna be on the edge while I fuck you, baby. If you've never had anything in that tight hole of yours, it's gonna make the whole thing *even better.”*

Really, Billy just likes keeping Steve on the edge. It's not like Steve really needs Billy to baby him.

But -- it's kinda hot, too.

Steve groans, hands falling away as he goes lax in something like defeat. He blinks up at the ceiling, body trembling between breaths, muscles tight in his abdomen and his thighs.

He blinks a few times. To clear the haze of pleasure, maybe. Or to get his head back on the game they're playing.

Or, when Steve blinks at him with those big eyes, maybe to break Billy's resolve.

“Please?” Steve says, voice wobbling but gaze sharp. “Please, Billy? Need you-- need you so bad. Wanna feel what it's like to have you filling me. Wanna feel you come inside of me.”

Manipulative little brat.

Like Billy doesn't know what he's doing.

So Billy slides off of him. Takes his time rearranging himself up against the headboard of Steve's bed. Getting comfy.

Then, finally, he nudges Steve with a foot from where he'd left him.

"Come here, *baby."* A little too sweet. A little dangerous.

Steve props himself up, hair a mess, and he turns over and crawls close. He's careful, eyes on Billy as he moves, like he knows exactly what kind of predator is sitting in his bed right now.

Dipping down, Steve kisses up Billy's thigh, like an apology. He presses his mouth to his hip, then trails up his side, lingering over his heart with soft, unbridled affection before pulling back and meeting Billy's gaze.

He's a pretty damn picture. Cock hard between his thighs, on his hands and knees, flush and eager.

Billy doesn't let it fool him. The second Steve is close enough, the second Billy's had his fill of fake-saccharine, he yanks Steve closer by the hips. Gets him nice and wobbly on his knees.

"I should fucking spank you," Billy says, voice low. Warning.

Steve lets out a short breath, pupils blowing out wide, and he balances himself with his hands on Billy's shoulders. "Should you?"

And there's that look again. Something *calculating*.

Steve leans in, slow and steady, even as Billy's fingers tighten at his hips. He presses his mouth to Billy's cheek. Ghosts his lips to his ear.

Presses just a little more. Pushes-- just to see if Billy will push back.

"Gonna choke me, too, lover?" Steve asks, voice a hush, an electric rush of memory like liquid fire.

And jesus, Steve's never been this much of a brat before. And Billy feels like maybe he missed out on something back from Steve's high school days. It could've been something they played with over the summer, so easily. But then again, Billy had been so unrestrained. Too much like a loose cannon.

Billy lets one of his hands sneak to the smooth surface of Steve's ass. Then he grabs him, rough, fist clenching over warm flesh. Jerks him that much closer.

When Steve gasps, Billy grins. “Might. Or I might give your mouth something to do to keep busy if you don't stop being so *smart* with me.”

Then, Billy lets go, winds his hand back, and brings it against Steve’s ass with a loud *smack*.

Steve *yelps,* rocking forward on his knees, eyes going wide, hands spasming over Billy's shoulders. He goes still, letting out a shaky little breath, and shifts.

Like he wasn't actually expecting Billy to follow through and he's not sure if he likes it.

But then he gives a little nod, barely there, and squeezes at Billy's shoulders through the jacket. Silent permission.

“Gonna punish me, Hargrove?”

“Maybe,” Billy says, a little out of his depths. A little off track from where he figured they'd been going. But that doesn't mean he's not hard in his jeans. And it doesn't mean Steve isn't being a brat.

He wraps an arm around Steve’s legs and pulls him close. So Steves cock is trapped up against Billy's torso.

“You gonna stop being such a brat?” Billy doesn't slap him again, but does grab his ass where he had spanked him, where the flesh is a little hot to the touch. And he squeezes.

Steve stares down at him, eyes still a little wide, lips parted as he kneels flush against him. His hands ease up, curving over Billy's nape,

and he dips down to kiss him-- long and slow and deep.

“Maybe,” he says, when they part, rocking against him.

“Maybe, huh?” Billy says, but kisses back. Lets himself go a little sweeter for a moment.

His fingers trail over the hot skin on Steve's cheek, nice, comforting. Because they hadn't exactly *talked* about this. Because Billy probably wouldn't have done this in high school. Not like this, anyway. Not so personally.

Steve shivers, resting his forehead against Billy's and nudging at his nose. A quiet intimacy, a seriousness, bleeding into their game.

“I'll tell you if I need you to stop,” Steve says, in a hush.

Billy kisses him, calm and quiet. Like they're taking a pause. “Do you want that?” Because he has to know, has gotta. “Wanna give you what you want, baby.”

Steve's eyes are warm when he pulls back, his smile slow. “It's part of the fantasy, right? I kinda always thought-- back then, anyway, that you'd-- yeah. I want it. Want anything you'll give me.”

And jesus if that doesn't make Billy blush a little.

He catches Steve in another long kiss.

When he pulls back, he's grinning.

“Got you leaking all over me, baby. Some kinda princess, huh, with that smart mouth of yours?”

Steve rolls his hips again, rutting shamelessly. “Never said I was a princess. Or well behaved.”

“You’re clearly *not*,” Billy says. He smacks at Steve’s ass lightly. “Stop that. That’d be an embarrassing way to get yourself off, huh? And to think, I don’t even have my dick in you. Not even my *fingers*.”

Steve laughs, and he ruts *dirtier*. Moves his hips, flexes in a sinuous

way Billy didn't think him capable. In a way Billy doesn't see outside of dark clubs and bars.

“Make me,” Steve says, catching Billy's jaw in hand and tipping his face up to catch his mouth, teeth dragging over his lower lip.

Billy kisses him deep, kisses him dirty. And then, while he's doing it, he slaps Steve's ass again.

Steve rocks with it. Gasps against his mouth and braces a hand on the top of the headboard behind him, clutching it as his fingers dig in at Billy's jaw. Sucks at his tongue like a filthy promise.

It doesn’t take long for Billy to switch hands, to slap the other side of Steve’s ass. It *should* be discouraging him, but it’s not. They both know it’s not. But that doesn’t really stop Billy, and it certainly doesn’t seem to be detering Steve.

“Lube,” Billy demands, getting a good handful of Steve’s ass. “Gimme your lube, princess. I’m gonna make you scream.”

Steve shudders, nodding his head, and he pulls away just enough to fumble for the lube in the bedside drawer. He's unashamed in the eager way he presses back close, hands the bottle over, and dives for another heady, sloppy kiss.

Billy doesn't bother being careful with it. He wouldn't have been, five years ago. He would’ve been messy and sloppy, uncaring where he got lube or how much he wasted. It’s worth it, too, when he sees Steve’s expression change when Billy runs a slick finger down the crease of him. When he teases at Steve’s entrance with a slick digit, pressing against him with the pad of his thumb.

“So fucking good for me, baby,” Billy says. “So goddamn *needy*, too.”

Steve moans, taking Billy’s face between his hands, drawing out another long kiss as he rocks back against him, knees on either side of his thighs-- and Billy can’t believe they haven’t *done this* yet. That he hasn’t had Steve in his lap like this yet.

“Told you,” Steve says. “I wanna feel you in me.”

“Yeah? Impatient brat,” Billy says.

He doesn’t wait. He slides a finger into Steve, relishing the easy way it slides into him, the way Steve’s warmth accepts him. And sure, it’s easier because Steve *isn’t* a virgin, but there’s something to be said for the way Steve opens for him.

Steve gasps out a ragged, ruined sound. His eyes are wide on Billy’s face and his body tightens, trembles, and then goes easy as he rocks back. His mouth hangs open as his chest heaves, as he rides back onto Billy’s hand, and it’s one of the most positively lewd things Billy’s ever seen.

Billy doesn’t wait too long to push a second slick finger into Steve. He knows that Steve can take it, and he wants to pry as many sounds of of Steve as possible.

And he’s rewarded for it.

It’s ridiculous, the way Steve rides him, hips rocking like he’s hungry for it. Like he can’t get enough fingers in him, like Billy just can’t fill him up enough. So, Billy crooks his fingers and catches Steve’s mouth in his, surging up to kiss him hard. To catch all of those sounds into his mouth.

Steve lets out a sound like a sob against his lips. Shudders and bucks as Billy touches him, stretches him, *fills* him. His cock weeps precome against his stomach, smearing when he rocks, hips stuttering to match the slide of Billy’s fingers. Billy catches the sound on his tongue, the mewl that follows, and everything else as Steve twitches tight around him.

When it all gets too much, Billy slows down. He even pulls his fingers out, just to drizzle them in lube once more. When he pushes them back into Steve, the slide is easy and Steve is loose and relaxed around him. He’s slow with it, scissoring his fingers like he’s lazy, like he hasn’t got a care in the world. He takes his time kissing Steve, licking into his mouth before he starts pushing in a third.

The finesse of the kiss degrades as Billy spreads him over his fingers. Steve is left gasping against his mouth, moaning as he moves, eyes

fluttering shut.

“*Billy*,” Steve braces his hands at the headboard again. “C’mon. Fuck me.”

“You think you can take me, princess?”

And Billy knows he can. But five years ago, before everything, maybe Steve would've been daunted. Billy fishes it out of his jeans, fist over his cock as he jerks himself a couple times while he fingers Steve with his other hand.

“You think you can get all of this inside you, baby?” Billy asks.

Steve groans. “*Yes*. Wanna feel how big you are inside me. Wanna see if you can *break* me.”

And that's music to Billy's ears. Because he knows he can't break Steve -- but back in the day he thought that he wanted to. And the idea is kinda thrilling. Kinda dizzying.

He slides his fingers out and slicks himself up, one hand on his cock, the other on Steve's waist, slowly urging Steve down.

Steve sucks in a tight breath as Billy breeches him. As the head of his cock presses in, stretches him out and Steve's throat works as he sinks down, down, *down*.

He's an inferno. Slick and tight and *hot*. Clenching, muscles working over him as he slides down, as he takes *more*.

He's glorious, panting open mouthed, head lulling back as Billy eases home into him. As he finds himself seated fully on the length of him. Shaking and *gorgeous*.

Billy could give him a second, and he does -- but just that. He promised Steve a party. Promised to break him. Promised him a good goddamn time.

So he snaps his hips up with a growl, surging forward to get Steve's mouth against his own. Kissing hard, kissing rough. All teeth.

Steve cries into it. Bucks and clenches *tight*, knuckles going white at the headboard. He gasps, wrecked and ragged little moans, as Billy thrusts up into him. As he scrambles to meet him.

Billy grunts, hands finding purchase on Steve's hips to pull him down. To find leverage to thrust into him deep. And the slide of it is so easy, so hot and slick, that it has Billy groaning, flashes of white hot pleasure with every snap of his hips.

“Fuck, princess,” Billy pants. “You're riding my dick like a pro, huh?”

Steve’s hands fall to Billy's shoulders. To the denim. He curls his fingers there and rolls his hips down, gasping, a fine sweat rolling down his temple, over his skin. Face flush.

“That's because,” Steve breathes, dipping down to mouth at his jaw, rolling down and going tight just to make Billy jerk. “I wanna feel you come in me.”

Billy can feel his dick jerk at that, biting back the groan from the heat of the idea.

“Yeah, you'd like that, huh? Me filling you up? You think you deserve it?”

Billy’s hips snap up, fucking into that hot tightness as Steve rolls his hips down. And then, because he *can*, Billy brings his hand back against Steve's ass, slapping it as he buries Billy's dick deep.

Steve bucks, sharply, and cries out. His eyes are wide and when Billy feels him stutter, feels the way his muscles wind tight, he understands *why*.

He spills out against his Billy's chest and stomach, riding it out. Sobbing out and squeezing his eyes shut tight as his orgasm rips suddenly and sharply through him.

And *holy fucking shit.*

Clearly, neither of them expected *that.*

The rush of Steve coming, of him clenching around Billy, is hot and

dizzying. The contractions of slick muscle around his cock have him gasping, rutting up, groaning.

“Baby,” Billy says, arms going around Steve instantly, hands going for his hair. Steadying.

Steve trembles against him, breath coming in short bursts. He bucks and whines, hiding his face against Billy's throat as the tension in his body gives. Burning there and under his touch, quivering as he tries to sink back into his own bones.

Billy doesn't buck his hips, but he doesn't pull out either. Just holds Steve close and presses a nose to his hair. Murmuring soft little things in his ear. Telling him how *good* he is, how much Billy loves him.

Because as much as he aches, he’s a little blown away, too.

Steve shudders, tucking himself against Billy as he winds down. As his breath evens out and his body stops straining through pleasure.

“I'm okay,” Steve mumbles, face pressing to his throat. “I'm okay. Keep going.”

Billy takes a second to press a kiss at Steve's temple, to just breathe him in.

Then, he allows himself to move, hips rolling up to thrust into Steve once more. And now, after coming, Steve is even tighter than before, squeezing in around Billy as he pumps into him.

Billy keeps him close, arms like a vice around Steve, though he allows one of his hands to slip down, to palm his ass over where he slapped him. Skin still hot to the touch of his hand.

“So good, baby,” Billy pants. “You're taking me so well.”

A whine wells up in Steve's throat, shudders and shakes out of him as an undoubted oversensitivity overwhelms him. He pulls back to rest his forehead against Billy's, breathing and rocking with him, thighs tight and trembling. He rests his hands at Billy's chest, over the pounding race of his heart, and chokes back another broken little sound as Billy presses deep.

There's something heady about Steve riding him like this, sitting pretty in his lap as Billy fucks into him. Taking his cock so well, clutching at Billy like he's made for it, like Billy's truly taking him apart.

It's the sounds that do it, the little broken things that Billy drags out of him with every thrust. He *knows* he's grazing Steve's prostate, can feel it with the way Steve's body jerks, the way he sounds each time Billy bucks his hips and drags him down.

It's the last broken gasp that pushes Billy over the edge, that has his rhythm faltering as his orgasm hits. He sinks into Steve as he comes, shuddering and groaning, pleasure washing over him in waves.

Steve collapses against him, completely fucked out. He groans, body clenching, milking him for all he's worth.

When they finish riding it out together, Steve presses his face to Billy's neck again. Hiding.

“Hey,” Billy says, getting his fingers into Steve's hair. Threading through it, comforting. Easing tension away with every pass of his fingers. “Hey, baby. C’mon and look at me.”

Steve lets out a little sound, lets himself be coaxed back, eyes a little wet and a little dazed. “I ruined the party,” he says, smile lopsided and maybe a little dopey.

“Did you?” Billy asks, pressing a kiss to the corner of Steve's lips. “Because I had a good party. What about you?”

He doesn't stop playing with Steve's hair, doesn't stop touching him all over.

Steve shivers. Turns his face and kisses at Billy’s jaw.

“I did,” he mutters. “Great party. Way better than the actual party.”

“Jesus, baby. You are *so* hot. I can't even begin to describe to you…” Billy says, trailing off so that he can kiss Steve.

He drags his hands down Steve's spine until they come to rest on his

ass, kneading at the muscle there.

“Did you like that? I mean, was it fine, to just--?”

“It was fine,” Steve says. “It was-- I mean, it was *perfect*. I didn’t-- I wasn’t really expecting--”

Steve is blushing again. Sitting, bare and flush with him, still smelling like sex and *blushing*.

“Granted, I guess I didn’t really expect to like your hand around my neck so much that one time, either.” Steve says.

“I think you like me taking you apart, sometimes,” Billy says.

It relieves something right within him, knowing that Steve *liked* it. That it wasn't too much.

“Maybe we can try something like that again sometime,” Billy says. “Now that I'm, you know, not --” like how he was.

“Yes,” Steve says, a hand skirting down Billy's arm, finding his wrist and bringing it around between them. “If you want.”

He places a kiss to Billy's palm, presses his cheek into his touch, and closes his eyes. Lets out a sigh that sounds like relief.

“I trust you. You--" Steve hesitates, falters, and then guides Billy's open hand to his throat so that it's just resting there. “I feel safe in your hands.”

Billy’s heartbeat kicks in his own throat, like a mirror.

He curses under his breath, because how can Steve do this to him? How can he wear him out and *still* get his dick twitching in interest even though he's spent.

“I feel safe in yours, too. Feel safe with you,” Billy says.

Steve frames Billy's face with his hands, guides him up, kisses him slow. “Good.”

“But jesus,” Billy says after a long moment, after his heart calms down a bit. “You are *such* a brat.”

Steve huffs out a little laugh. “You didn't like it?”

Billy groans a little when Steve laughs, his body tightening around Billy. But then he laughs, too. “I fucking loved it,” he says, leaning forward to steal another kiss.

“I'll have to remember that,” Steve mutters, between kisses. “I liked the way you responded.”

“What, *encouraging* you?”

Steve laughs again, and then groans when the movement brings attention to the way they're still connected. “Pushing back. Not letting me get away with it.”

“God, you're so *hot,”* Billy says, mouth at Steve's jaw. “Love when you push back. Love when you're a brat. Love you.”

And with that, Billy catches him in another kiss and pushes Steve backward until his back hits the bed, until Billy is plastered over him, hips rolling back into Steve. Starting it all anew.

Steve gasps, arching up under him, legs wrapping around him. A sound catches in his chest and melts over Billy's tongue when he catches it from Steve's lips.

It's desperate and high and completely breathless. It's perfect.

“*Billy*,” Steve whines, hands fisting into his jacket.

Billy's still only half hard, but it feels so sinfully good, Steve all tight and clenching around him.

Billy doesn't fully thrust, just ruts into Steve.

“What's that, baby? Too much?” Billy teases.

Steve shudders and rolls up to meet him, clenching around him and moaning out, pulling at his jacket. “Get this fucking thing off before

we ruin it."

And Billy laughs, letting Steve pull it off of him to dump on the ground. He's already going to have to wash his jeans, he knows, but it's worth it.

Steve hums, smoothing his hands over skin, straining up for him as they press together. His eyes are dark, hungry, and Billy wonders if he's always this insatiable-- or if it's just Billy that gets him like this.

"Love you," Steve kisses to his cheek and then tightens his legs around him. "Love you so much it's stupid."

Billy groans, hips jerking to drive into Steve harder. He can feel himself filling out, relishing in Steve's tightness around him.

"Well you certainly love getting fucked by me," Billy says, some of his earlier bite and playfulness slipping back into his tone.

Steve grunts, jaw flexing as Billy drives in a little firmer, a little deeper as they work each other up. His head falls back against the bed as he tries to catch his bearings, his breath, and he curls his fingers into the muscles bunching at Billy's back.

"Thought--" Steve sucks in a sharp breath. "*Fuck*. Thought you were gonna break me, Hargrove."

And Billy *grins*.

"What?" he asks, hips snapping hard as he drives into Steve, brutal as he pushes into Steve's depths. "Am I not fucking you *hard* enough, baby?"

Steve's head snaps back. He quakes, keen catching on each breath, and he moves with each thrust, mouth falling open.

He arches, straining under him, seems lost for a second in raw sensation. When he catches himself, draws back from drowning in the press of their bodies, he meets Billy's eyes.

His hands skim down Billy's back. Curve over his ass. Squeezes and drags him closer.

“Harder,” he says, challenges, gasping even now.

And Billy can do that.

His own come makes the way slick, giving him the extra slide he needs to fuck hard into Steve’s welcoming heat. The pace is rough and punishing, and Billy thinks of slapping Steve’s ass, of the way Steve’s body shuddered above him. He ruts down, hips jerking, bracing himself against the bed, one hand slinking under Steve to urge his hips up, to get his back curving just right.

Steve's expression twists up-- into something caught between pain and complete rapture. He tries to swallow down his sounds, tries to choke them back, but the angle has him falling to pieces. Has his eyes rolling back, has his cock twitching, half hard and spent against his stomach, has his hips jerking and breath stalling.

And Billy eats up his noises, kissing him sloppy, messy, stupid.

“You think you can come again?” Billy says, breaking away to bite at Steve’s jaw, to mouth at his neck.

Steve whimpers, head lulling over for him. “I don't-- I don't know.”

Billy slips his hand from underneath Steve to between them, getting his fingers over his cock. Working him as he keeps thrusting, hard.

“Sure sounds like it,” Billy says, grinning as he bites Steve’s neck again. “You’re loud as shit, *princess*.”

Steve moans, broken and breathless, and his cock pulses, twitches, fills a bit more under Billy's attentions. “*Billy*. I can't-- I *can't*--”

Billy’s fucking Steve as hard as he can, jerking him off in time with each of his thrusts. When Steve whines, like he needs *more*, Billy’s got nothing else to give him.

“Come on, baby,” he pants in Steve’s ear as Steve’s cock fills out his fist, as Steve whimpers and pants and gasps out his name. “You’re so good for me, I know you wanna.”

But Steve’s still whining and Billy’s close too.

And -- oh. *Oh*.

He adjusts himself, props himself up on his elbow and slots his fingers around Steve’s neck, slowing down his pace a little bit, but still driving into Steve just as hard. He presses down, tightens his grip around Steve’s neck just a bit, just hard enough that Steve can’t ignore it, can’t breathe without a little hint of Billy, too.

Steve's breath catches, falters, nearly stops all together. The sounds he makes go higher, with something even more desperate.

And then he's breaking. Shattering apart, throat working under Billy's palm, as he bows up and comes between them. As his eyes roll back, as he spills out over Billy's fingers, as he leaves angry, red lines up Billy's back.

Billy fucks him through it -- but just barely. It’s so hot, such a goddamn rush of power, that he can barely hold himself together. It’s when Steve’s coming down, whining and spent, that Billy lets himself come, burying himself inside Steve with a grunt and one last snap of his hips.

He takes his hand from Steve’s neck and replaces it with his lips, pressing kisses over his perfect skin.

“So good,” Billy murmurs. “So fucking hot. Jesus christ, baby, you’re so perfect.”

Steve hums. He's still shaking a little, but he's boneless beneath him.

“Gonna ruin me,” Steve slurs, dazed.

“Promise I won’t,” Billy says, pressing a kiss to Steve’s temple. “Promise I won’t.”

Steve turns his face to him, nudging at his nose, loose and lazy. “Be okay if you did. Wouldn't mind.”

Billy hums, a fond smile creeping to his face. “Okay,” he says, carefully. “Only if I get to put you back together again, huh?”

Steve nods. “Okay.”

“I always will,” Billy promises.

-*-

Lucas is leaving in three days for orientation. The kids are despondent, connected at the hip, clinging. Steve tells Billy he thinks that they should give them some alone time, together, and he even gives Dustin the keys to his hatchback after the curly headed dweeb swears to return it without a scratch.

Billy doesn’t say it, but he thinks Steve might be a little morose about the whole thing too. At the beginning of summer, he’d looked at Steve and thought *hot dad*, and now it’s starting to look like he’s about to be an empty nester.

It’d be cute if it wasn’t a little bit sad, too.

“Maybe you should get a dog,” he says, curled up with Steve on the couch, the kids gone, the afternoon light bleeding in gold and red. “Or a cat, or something.”

“What?” Steve tilts his head, fingers pausing in their idle stroke through Billy’s curls. “What are you talking about?”

Billy shrugs, feeling a little hot under the collar. Uncomfortable. “Dunno. Just -- that’s what people do, when their kids go away to college. They get a pet, or whatever.”

Steve snorts, but his fingers continue, as he lounges back in the corner of the couch, Billy tucked up against him. “They're not *my* kids.”

“I mean,” Billy says, his eyes drifting half-closed, more relaxed with every pull of Steve’s fingers. “They kind of *are*.”

Because Steve has been heavily involved in these kids’ lives for, what, five years, plus? They’ve been through hell together, pretty literally, and presumably most of their parents don’t even know.

What Billy *wants* to say is: *My apartment allows cats*.

What he *wants* to say is: *I don’t like seeing you all sad like this*.

But Billy's not *good* at emotions, or at comfort, really. So he just relaxes more heavily against Steve's chest, pressing him down against the couch, and bites his own tongue.

"Nah," Steve says, pressing his mouth to the crown of Billy's head. "But I will miss them. A whole helluva lot. It's weird to think about this town without them in it-- even if most of them are pretty close by."

"Yeah," Billy says, mouth a little dry. His hope had been that maybe Steve would follow him to California -- but it doesn't seem like Steve's thinking that way at all. "Alright, baby."

Steve huffs out a little laugh. "You sound dubious. You don't think this place will be weird without those troublemakers running around?"

"No, yeah, sure, you're right. It'll be weird."

Steve stills again, pulling back and angling away a bit to frown at him. "What's up?"

Billy frowns and presses his ear against Steve's chest, just resting there.

"Why'd you stop?" Steve's fingers are no longer in his hair and Billy can't stop the thought that it makes him feel so far away.

Steve sighs, sinks his fingers in to the scalp, and gives a little pull-- not enough to hurt, but enough for Billy to feel. "You're making a face. And using a tone. What's up?"

Billy grunts and frowns even harder. "I'm fine. I'm not using a *tone*."

"That's definitely a tone," Steve mutters, leaning down, kissing his brow and his temple. "You worried about them or something?"

Billy's worried about a lot of things. Too many to count, but nothing he particularly wants to *talk* about, because he never wants to ruin the moment. Or push too far. It's kind of eating him up inside.

"I'm worried about you," Billy finally settles on. "Just don't want to

see you get all empty-nest, you know?"

"Well, I'll be plenty distracted from my *empty nest* when I'm soaking up the golden coast, right?" Steve asks, nudging him.

Billy can't stop himself from pushing himself up, away from Steve, so that he can look into his face. His heart skips a beat.

He can't help but be a little surprised.

"You're coming with?" Billy asks, trying not to sound surprised and failing miserably. "Like -- actually?"

Steve blinks at him, smile off and crooked. "You don't want me to?"

Billy backpedals instantly. "No, I do. Absolutely, *jesus*. I just --" he swallows. "Didn't know if you wanted to. Didn't want to *ask*."

"I want to see where you live, Billy. Where you grew up. The things you love so much. The places that make you feel safe." Steve shrugs. "I figured that was a gimme. I guess I should've said. And you definitely should have asked."

Billy bites at his lip, and figures, since he *should* have asked, he might as well go for the truth.

"Last time we talked about it, it didn't go so well," Billy says.

He doesn't say he was scared, but he figures it's implied.

Steve frowns. "Last time we -- you mean the night you were *leaving*?"

"No," Billy says. "When you said it all wouldn't matter come August." Billy shrugs. "When we were talking about the monsters."

Billy had been so angry -- he doesn't like being that way, doesn't like thinking back to times when he's been so overwhelmed with emotion.

Steve frowns, and when he speaks, his voice is soft. "I didn't mean that I wouldn't come if you asked. I meant I thought you wouldn't ask. That you'd -- I dunno, Billy. That you'd figure out you didn't want me to follow."

“I’ve always hoped you’d follow. Always, baby.” Billy leans forward and kisses Steve’s cheek. “I’ve always thought about you coming with me. Always dreamed about it.”

Steve shudders, eyes closing on a breath, and he leans into that affection like a starved man.

“Then I'll follow.”

“Good,” Billy says, leaning in to press another kiss to Steve’s other cheek. “I'd love that.”

Steve smiles and steals a proper kiss. “I'll have to make a few arrangements. Maybe get Lucas’ sister to check up on the place from time to time.”

Billy leans in, lingering for a moment before pulling back. “Oh,” he says. “You’re gonna keep it?”

“Of course,” Steve says, making a little face at him. “This is-- I mean, this is my *home*, Billy.”

“Yeah, but I mean, are you planning on coming back?”

“Yes,” Steve says, a little slow, and he draws back a bit. “Of course I am.”

Billy can’t help but feel something deep in the pit of his chest. “What, like for good?”

“I don't know,” Steve says, and his voice clips short. “Maybe? I guess it depends on how things go, Billy. Or can you guarantee that things will be perfect out west? Or can you tell me without a fraction of a doubt that things won't go ass over kettle here?”

Billy shrugs, mostly because he *can’t*. But he *wants* it to go well, imagines it will. Hell, it’s everything he’s ever wanted and he doesn’t see why it wouldn’t all go perfectly.

He can’t lie -- there’s also an aspect of brutal *hope* there. Something that feels an awful lot like superstition. Like, if he imagines it going well, prepares for it, doesn’t accept any other eventualities -- it *will* go

perfectly out west.

“I mean, like, you could rent it out at least,” Billy finally says.

“My father died in this house. Barb died in this house. I grew up here. This place is full of--” Steve cuts himself off, bristling. “I'm not giving it up and I'm not letting some stranger stay here. Especially not when there could be an emergency and I have to come back.”

“What, like *ever*?” Billy clenches his teeth, takes a deep breath, and tries to steady himself. “Say we work out. Say we’re together for, what, five, ten years -- you’re just gonna let this place sit empty, vacant, for all that time?”

“*Yes,*” Steve says, like it's obvious. “Things could-- things can *always* go wrong. Between us, or back here. And when it does, what then? I wouldn't have anywhere else to go. And that's not even touching on the fact that I'd, I dunno, like to come home and *visit* my friends. Do you expect me to just leave all of this behind?”

“*No*,” Billy says, because he never expected that, but -- Hell, he’s not even sure exactly what he expected, but that wasn’t it. “That’s not what I meant,” he tries.

“Then what do you mean?” Steve pushes a hand through his own hair. “What did you *expect*, Billy? The idea of leaving *at all* is giving me the fucking shakes because it could *always* go wrong back here-- and where the fuck would I be? And I'm doing it for *you*, because I *love you*, but I can't-- I can't just leave this all behind.”

Billy pushes himself back too, because he feels hot all over and cooped up. Because he’s frustrated that he can’t get the right words out. Because he’s a little hurt, too, and he has no way of articulating it.

“That’s not what I expect, that’s --” He bites his lips, tries to gather his thoughts. But it’s hard. It’s *so* hard and he feels like he made it worse on himself with his own goddamn expectations. His little fantasy that they’d be perfect, that they’d have their forever. “Jesus, Steve, do you really plan on having one foot back in Hawkins for the rest of your life? Do you plan on waiting for it all to fall apart at the

drop of a hat? You can't *live* like that."

Steve blinks, head jerking back, flinching like Billy's slapped him. And before Billy can even feel guilty about it, Steve shoves off the couch, collects their empty beers and plates off of the coffee table and heads toward the kitchen.

"I'm keeping the house. I'm not renting it out." Steve says as he goes. "This discussion is over."

"What," Billy says, pushing up too, following Steve because he can't not, because he's stuck in Steve's orbit. "That's it? We're just not gonna talk about it?"

"We just did talk about it," Steve says, not looking at him, and the plates are a clatter in the sink. "And I told you my decision. So, talk over. I'm keeping the house. I'm keeping *one foot back in Hawkins*."

Billy drags his hands down his face.

"Look," he says, carefully. "It was stupid of me to think you wouldn't keep it, alright. I just," *had a fantasy*, he thinks. Like how he had the fantasy that he could walk back into Hawkins and pick up where everything left off. And that was stupid and unfair of him. But it doesn't mean that Billy doesn't think Steve's being a little unfair, too. "I just don't want you going into this thinking it's not going to work out, alright? That's -- a shitty start to something."

Steve barks out a sharp laugh. "I kinda figured we already *had* started something."

"That's not fair. You *know* what I meant," Billy says, jaw clenching.

"No. No, Billy, I don't." Steve snaps, turning to face him, arms crossed over his chest. "And not *fair*? What's not *fair* is you always expecting me to know what you mean when you don't actually *say it*. Unlike some of the company I keep, I'm not psychic. I can't read your fucking mind, okay? I can guess, and I'm lucky when I'm right, but I don't *know* unless you tell me."

"Look, I'm *trying*, alright? I'm trying to talk to you, but that's real hard, alright, when you tell me that you're done, that the discussion's

over.” Billy takes a breath, still in the doorway of the kitchen, unwilling to step inside because he doesn’t like feeling this frustrated, this at-odds and angry with himself for assuming something so goddamn stupid.

“Why do you *do* that?” Steve asks, shoulders drawing up. “You always-- the discussion about *the house* is over, Billy. I'm done talking about *the house*. You always take my words and twist them into something worse.”

“I’m not *just* talking about the house, Steve. I’m talking about you living, about you approaching anything new, like shit’s going to go down at any goddamn moment.”

“Because it *could*. Because it *has.*” Steve says, eyes growing hard. “You may know now, Billy, but you don't-- you *don't know*. You don't *understand.* You weren't here.”

“Okay,” Billy says. “Okay, you’re right, I don’t understand.” He knows that he doesn’t, that he probably never will. Billy burns hot, frustration welling up in his chest. “But would you even *let* me? If it all happened again, would you even let me?”

Because Steve has made it pretty goddamn clear that this is *his* world, that he’s not willing to share it with Billy. Even if Billy understands the dangers, even if Billy *wants* to be there for him. Steve’s made it clear that it’s not Billy’s decision to make.

Steve stares at him for a long moment. His jaw is tight, his body rigid, like a band ready to snap.

Billy dreads the next words out of his mouth.

“No,” Steve says, and Billy feels the floor drop out from under him. “No, I wouldn't.”

“Jesus,” Billy says, trying to take a breath but his chest is tight. “Wow.”

Steve winces. “Billy--”

“*No*,” Billy says. “You know what? I don’t want to hear it.”

Steve sucks in a sharp breath, but he doesn't push. He just nods, accepting it like that's the only thing he can do.

Like he expected this.

Billy sighs, letting out all the air in his lungs. He doesn't have words, just stands in the doorway and wonders if he should *go*.

Steve shifts on his feet.

"What do we--?" Steve's throat works; his eyes stray. "What do you want to do, Billy?"

Billy swallows.

"I think," he says carefully. "That *that's* a question you should probably be asking yourself." Billy decides to go for the truth, to actually articulate something for once. "Because what I want is you. In whatever goddamn way you'll have me. Even. *Even* if that meant staying in Hawkins forever. But I want *you*. And I want a you that doesn't have one foot out of this relationship from the very beginning, ready to run at the drop of a hat. I want a you that thinks of us as a goddamn team, not as -- something temporary."

Steve shudders, breath leaving him in a rush, shoulders slumping. He doesn't deny it. Doesn't try and say *I don't think that*.

It hurts. It hurts a lot.

"Okay," Billy says, trying to bite down on the pain, fists clenching at his sides. "Think about it, I guess."

"Billy," Steve breathes, lips pressed thin. "I-- I *love* you. I just… I want you to know that. I love you, okay?"

"Do you?" Billy bites out, unable to stop himself. "Do you *actually*?"

"Yes," Steve whispers, words catching in his throat, and there are tears-- just like that night, so long ago when Billy asked him to follow and Steve told him *no,* staring at him like his heart was breaking-- quiet and small and delicate. "Yes, Billy, I do."

And Billy -- well, he's still a little tender. "Look, I know I was being unfair about the house shit. I do. And I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have let my fantasies shape my expectations like that. But," he swallows, "but I think you need to think about what you want. About if -- if you mean that."

Steve's arms curl tighter over his chest. Like he's trying to curl in on himself.

"You should go," he says.

Billy nods, the movement sharp and jerky. "Okay," he says, feeling his chest tighten and then turn. "Okay."

And so he goes.

-*-

Lucas leaves.

Billy doesn't see him off. He avoids the send-off entirely, knowing Steve will be there, knowing Steve will want his space.

Billy doesn't count the days that Steve avoids him. It's pointless to. Depressing to.

"Are you going to stop moping?" Max says, hovering in the doorway of Billy's room. He's here in Susan's house, sprawled out in his old room, even though most of his stuff is still stuffed in a drawer at Steve's place. He hasn't been back.

He even bought himself a new toothbrush.

"Look, it's not like he dumped you," Max says.

Billy just grunts.

They're leaving in a couple days, and Steve hasn't even called. Billy hasn't even seen a hair on his beautiful, perfectly-coiffed head.

"*Did* he dump you?" Max presses.

“It was kinda fucking unclear,” Billy says.

Max blinks. “Wait. Did *you* dump *him*?”

Billy looks at her, eyebrows pinching together. “No,” he says. Then: “no? Jesus. I don’t think so.”

Max plops down onto the bed next to him, shoving at his side. “You don't think so, or you didn't?”

Billy only scoots over enough to let her lie down, but keeps his arm pressed up against hers. Because maybe he’s a little sad, alright, and maybe some contact makes him feel better.

“I told him he should think about what he wants. I -- made it pretty clear I wanted him. Even if,” he swallows, “even if that means staying in Hawkins.”

“Wow,” Max whistles. “That's big. But he wouldn't ever make you do that.”

“Maybe not, but he made it pretty clear that he never really wanted to truly leave Hawkins. So.”

Max snorts. “That's not true.”

Billy shrugs. “Maybe I’m not being totally fair, but. It felt a hell of a lot like he’s already got one foot out the door. Like he’s just *waiting* to come back.”

“Do you know how much Steve hates it here?” Max props herself up onto an elbow to look at him, face resting in her palm.

“He’s not even willing to rent out his house. Like, even if he’s gone for five years, he won’t rent it out. He’ll just let it sit empty, *just in case*.”

“Billy, Steve fucking hates this town,” Max waves him off. “He hates this town and sometimes he even hates that house, but-- Steve's better than a lot of us. Gives up a lot for us. Would come running if any of us asked. He's stupid.”

Billy sighs. “He’s not stupid. He just loves you guys. He’d put it all on the line for you all, even if that means sacrificing his life. Or -- his happiness.”

“He's stupid,” Max concludes. “But that doesn't mean-- I mean, he loves you, Billy. Don't think he doesn't just because he's stupid and cares too much.”

“You know,” Billy says, after a while. “He just expects me to sit there. If shit goes down again, he just expects me to sit there and watch him run into the thick of it. He wouldn’t let me help. And that’s -- jesus, that’s so *unequal*. It’s so fucking *unfair*. Why the hell does he get to make that decision for me, huh?”

And maybe Billy’s just upset about all of it, because he drapes his arm over his face and breathes in deep, throat tight.

“Why doesn’t he get that I’d come back with him?” Billy asks. “That I’d do anything for him?”

“I think maybe he does get that. And maybe that's why he's so… stubborn about it.” Max says, soothing. “He knows what that looks like. How dangerous it can be.”

“I'm not just in this for the good times. And I don't think -- he gets that.”

Billy signs into the darkness of his arm.

“I'm probably expecting too much.” Billy says.

“Probably,” Max says. “But are you really just gonna… walk away again? Leave without knowing? Two days, Billy. That's all you got. Possibly ever. You gonna let that go?”

“I -- I'm not just going to leave without saying goodbye, at least,” Billy says.

“Then you should do that,” Max says. “Soon.”

“I wanted to give him time. He told me to leave, so. I didn't want to crowd him.”

“When did he tell you to go?”

Billy winces. He peeks out from underneath his arm. “After I told him to think about if he actually loved me.”

And yeah, maybe that wasn't really *fair* of Billy, but it's also something Billy thinks Steve *does* need to do.

Max sighs, flopping back again. “Dummy.”

“*Look*,” Billy says. “I don’t think that’s totally unreasonable. Right?”

“Someone can love you and not trust you with some things, Billy.” Max tells him. “Someone can love you and still have issues. You shouldn't doubt that.”

Billy sighs. “I know. I know.”

And they’ve only really, truly, been dating for three months. It’s kind of absurd for Billy to think that this is something that will be perfect. That there won’t be any bumps along the way on their road.

It’s ridiculous to expect so much.

“Well?” Max shoves at him. “Go! Talk to him! Stop moping.”

“I’ve got a few days. I don’t want to press him.”

“*Billy*,” Max groans.

“*Max*,” Billy groans back, mimicking. “Look, I'll think about it, alright?”

“Alright,” Max sighs. “I just… don't regret anything, okay? Talk to him.”

Billy knows she's right. Nods and turns his gaze to the ceiling, watching the fan rotate, wishing that-- like everything else-- it would slow down.

-*-

He leaves it until the last day. Until they're twenty four hours from

heading out.

He won't admit it, but Max knows without El telling her that he's scared. Scared Steve will turn him away. Will realize he doesn't love him enough for this. That Steve will stay here, trapped by his own fear, for forever.

But, at the very least, he needs to get his clothes.

That's why he's outside Steve's house, the one he won't give up, so early in the morning. That's why he climbs out of his car, bones heavy, and makes his way to the door, the key Steve gave him burning a hole against his palm.

That's why he falters, three steps from the door, when Steve comes bursting out.

“Steve--"

“Get in the car,” Steve says, not looking at him, but looking like shit-- like he hasn't slept, like he's running on fumes, hair a mess, darkness under his eyes, one of Billy's shirts wrinkled beyond redemption hanging off of him-- and Billy hates to think he did this.

“What--?”

Steve takes Billy by the wrist, dragging him toward the Camaro. “Get in the car, Billy.”

And so Billy does. He slides back into the driver's seat and unlocks his door so that Steve can flop into the passenger seat.

“Where to?” Billy asks, words coming before he can truly think about just how confused he is.

“Merril’s farm. Where he used to grow the pumpkin patch every year.” Steve says, buckling in. “Gun it. Before I change my mind.”

Billy drives. He's still got the taste of morning coffee on his tongue, the sun still rosy pink in the sky by the time he pulls down the road with the pumpkin patch. He’d never been there, but he still knew the way -- Hawkins is so small: it's so hard to forget any of it.

In the seat next to him, Steve's leg is bouncing. He's chewing on the side of his thumb, arms half crossed over his chest, and when Billy rolls over the dirt and gravel path up toward the house, Steve clears his throat.

“Stop here,” he says.

Billy doesn't need to ask what this is about, with the way Steve is anxiously sitting in the passenger's seat. He knows. But he lets Steve guide him anyway, staying quiet.

Billy kills the engine, and undoes his belt.

“You don't have to,” Billy finally says.

Steve closes his eyes. “Yeah, actually, I *do*. If I want to keep you, I do. Get out of the car.”

Steve doesn't wait for him. Unbuckles and climbs out on his own, door clicking shut behind him as he stands at the edge of the field, waiting.

Even from the driver's seat, Billy can see the fence around the back half of the open field. There's a big lock on it, and when Billy climbs out, he wonders how they're getting in. But Steve digs a set of keys from his jeans, and they rattle between his fingers.

Billy catches up and reaches out, his fingers closing over Steve's.

“You don't have to do anything to keep me,” Billy says. “I promise. Look -- if you want to stay, if you want to never share this with me, that's -- it's okay. I'll drop Max off and come back here for you.”

“No,” Steve says. “I don't want you to do that.”

“But I would,” Billy says. “You don't have to do anything to keep me,” he repeats.

“Do you want to know or not, Billy?” Steve asks, not pulling from his touch. “Do you want to understand why I will never fully leave this place? Because if I go with you, I need you to back me if I ever have to return. Which means you need to understand.”

Billy pauses, his fingers going tighter over Steve's. "You'll let me back you?"

Steve looks away. "If you decide to, I won't stop you."

Billy takes a breath. It's not an enthusiastic agreement, but then again -- he suspects he wouldn't be super enthusiastic about Steve putting his life on the line, either.

"Okay," Billy says. He squeezes Steve's hand once more and then lets go. "Okay. Thank you."

Steve gives him a look as he cracks open the padlock. "Don't thank me just yet."

"I'm thanking you for sharing this with me, Steve. For -- talking to me. I appreciate it."

Steve's lips press thin. "Okay."

Then, he presses the gate open and guides Billy into the barren field.

Twenty paces deep, there are posts. A warning sign is clipped to one of them-- *Authorized Personnel Only*-- but Steve blows by it and toward a ditch that leads down to a hole that's been capped by a metal grate.

"They cemented it, a couple years ago. Put a ladder in. Once every six months, someone comes and checks. Usually with flame throwers." Steve says as he crouches, unlocking the padlock there, too. "It, uh… doesn't like the heat."

Billy nods.

He can't help but notice the way his heartbeat has kicked up, like his body *knows* that this is a dangerous place to be. Like it knows better than him.

There's nothing when Steve opens it. No billowing rush of cold or steam. No animal or monster.

Just darkness.

Steve's jaw is tight as he pulls out a small flashlight from his pocket. “I'll go down first and tell you when I'm clear. Okay?”

It's not okay. Billy -- doesn't like that, not at all. But he knows this isn't the time to argue or to push.

“Okay,” he says slowly. “After you, then.”

Steve nods, cracks the flashlight on and places it between his teeth. With practiced ease that does nothing to sooth Billy, Steve slides in, and starts climbing down.

Soon, his entire form is overwhelmed by darkness.

Billy waits for what feels like five minutes but is probably only thirty seconds.

“Baby?”

There's a flash of light-- Steve angling it to the ladder for him.

“Watch your step,” Steve calls back. “Come down slow.”

Billy is more awkward on the ladder than Steve, but he makes it down after a bit, feet finally coming to rest safe on the ground.

All the hairs on the back of his neck are up.

The tunnel smells *sweet* like death and decay, and darkness folds in around them like a thick fog.

“So,” Billy says, trying for *conversational* and not *scared*. “This is it.”

In the shallow light, Steve's face is fraught with tension. The fear is bleeding off of him, in the way he shakes, and he stands there as Billy settles-- lingering as far away from the walls as possible.

Steve lets out a short breath and nods.

“This is it.” Steve says. “Watch the walls. There are spores, still, and sometimes they spit. But at least the vines don't move anymore.”

“Alright,” Billy says.

Then, he reaches out into the light of the flashlight and offers his hand.

“If you want,” Billy says, even though he can't deny that he's a little unsure where they currently stand.

Steve hesitates, and for that moment there's this awful, terrible pitting in Billy's gut. But then he takes it, and pulls.

“This way,” Steve says, guiding him, face forward. “The tunnels stretch out under the town. Lover's Lake, the school, the lab. It's everywhere. When we check on it, it's too make sure the spores haven't spread it any further.”

Billy nods, jerky.

He follows a pace behind Steve, hands still clasped together. It feels a little safer -- like Billy has Steve's back. Like Steve's letting him.

It's hard, not to feel a little scared.

Steve knows the tunnels too well. Billy feels like they're a maze, but Steve seems to know every turn. Billy can't imagine the amount of times he's been down here, alone, in the dark.

They only stop when they reach something that looks like an antechamber, after walking for what seems like forever. Like the heart at the center of gloom. Branching off into a dozen different paths.

“There's two places like this one,” Steve tells him, voice low and rough, like he's afraid to be heard. “Here-- and by the Gate, at the lab. But the tunnels-- they're under the whole *town*. Like an invasive species, consuming everything.”

“And they don't, like -- collapse?” Billy asks, starting to feel a little closed in.

Steve looks at him. “You got a knife on you?”

“Yeah?” Billy asks. He usually carries one, especially since he started doing handy things around the place. “Do -- I *need* a knife?”

“No,” Steve says. “The walls-- they're strong. The vines are-- I don't know-- they're like rebar.”

“Is --” Billy narrows his eyes. “Are they like, *alive*?”

“They don't move anymore,” Steve admits. “I think they're degrading, slowly but surely, but-- they uh… they still scream if you damage them.”

Well if that's not fucking foreboding. Even if they're dying, or dead or whatever, Billy shifts a bit more into the middle of the tunnel.

Away from the walls.

“Hell,” he says.

“Something like that,” Steve says. “The one by the lab-- that's where I got hurt, last time. I usually only patrol it with Hopper, now.”

“But there's no reason to worry now, right? It's -- it's dead, or dying, or whatever?”

“It was dead and dying before,” Steve says, turning to him. “And if the Gate opens again, we'll be in the same damn place. Trying to stop it before it spreads more. When it's already taken so much.”

“Why don't they just fucking -- dump concrete down the tunnels?” Billy asks. “Fill ‘em up.”

“Science,” Steve tells him with a wan smile and a wiggle of his fingers. “Do you get it, though? Do you get why I can't-- I can't just *leave* and never come back?”

“Yeah,” Billy says, a little choked up. Scared and penned in. “Yeah -- I get it. But you can't -- you can't let it hold you back. You can't let it define *you*.”

“I wouldn't have agreed to leave with you if I was,” Steve says.

Billy can't help but ask: “Are you -- are you still leaving with me?”

Steve glances away. “I hadn't-- I kinda figured you didn't want me to

anymore.”

Oh.

Billy's teeth click together. “Why show me, then? If you thought I didn't want you to come with me?”

Steve shrugs. “I thought you should know why, before you left. I thought you should see it for yourself.”

“I want you to come with me,” Billy says quickly. “I mean. If you want to. If you would.”

Steve blinks. “Oh. I thought-- I didn't think you'd still-- maybe we shouldn't have this conversation here.”

Billy takes in a breath. “Yeah -- okay. Alright. Can we leave, then? I've -- seen enough.”

And honestly, Billy *hates* this place. It's awful. Steve is absolutely right about it.

Steve nods and gestures back down the path they'd first come. The walk back to the entrance is faster than the trek deeper.

Billy's grateful for that.

“Go on up,” Steve holds out the light for him. “I'll be right behind you.”

Billy swallows. “You wouldn't let me follow you up, would you?”

Steve's smile is soft but strained in the dim light filtering down from above. “No. Not this time.”

And that's enough for Billy to climb out first.

He hadn't realized how stifling, how cold it was, down there until he's on the surface again. Until the sun is beating down and there's clear air in his lungs.

Steve is quick and quiet behind him. Pausing just long enough to

snap the well shut and lock it again before standing proper.

“I need a shower,” Steve says, before Billy can say anything else. “You do, too.”

“Okay,” Billy says, nodding.

He had oddly forgotten it was the dead of summer.

When they get into the car, Billy still feels kind of chilled. But maybe that’s just echoing from the way Steve is sitting next to him, kind of frozen.

“Thank you,” Billy says, after they’re on the main road again, after they’re no longer kicking up gravel in their wake.

“Don't,” Steve sighs, slumping in his seat. “What I showed you today could get you killed.”

Billy *should* be scared by that, by the threat of the government breathing down on his neck. But he only feels relieved, in a way -- only feels grateful. Even if Steve isn’t planning on coming with him, even if nothing works out, it means the *world* that he shared this with Billy.

“Yeah? I don’t care. I care that you told me. And I’m thankful for it,” Billy says, adjusting his grip on the wheel.

“I just wanted--” Steve wets his lips, eyes out the windshield. “I didn't want you to walk away thinking I didn't trust you.”

Billy clenches his teeth. “I’m not going to just -- walk away.”

Steve lets out a shaky breath. “Okay.”

“After we’ve showered,” Billy says, trying to ignore the dread in his stomach. “After we’ve showered, we’ll talk.”

Steve finally looks at him again. “Okay.”

-*-

It's tempting to shower together. To lose himself in the softness of Steve's skin and the ease of his warmth.

They don't.

Steve showers in the spare, spends a long time there, and when he finally joins Billy in the master bedroom, his skin is flush from scrubbing. From the heat of the water. His hair is in his face and his towel is around his hips and Billy loves him.

Billy is in his own clothes, some of the spares he had at Steve's house. They had still been in the drawer, untouched. Which was better than finding the drawer empty, at least.

“You alright?” Billy can't help but ask, from where he's sitting on the edge of the bed, perched like he's not sure if he's welcome in the space anymore.

“I fucking hate those tunnels,” Steve mutters, smile small.

He stands there, at the edges of his own room, like he doesn't think he belongs there either.

It kind of breaks Billy's heart.

“Come sit next to me?” Billy asks, careful, cautious, soft.

Steve pads over, slow, and takes the place next to him. For a second, he doesn't touch him, keeps a sliver of that distance between them.

But then Billy's shoulder brushes his own and Steve goes weak into his side, trusting Billy to take his weight and the weight of everything between them even for just a moment.

Billy lets him lean, but keeps himself from wrapping an arm around Steve. He doesn't want to push -- and, if he lets himself admit it, is too scared of the possibility of Steve shrugging him off, of Steve pushing him away.

“I'm sorry,” Billy says. It all seems so stupid, now.

Steve turns his head to press his face against Billy's shoulder. “Yeah.

Me too.”

“I'd -- still like it if you came with me. Even just to see California,” Billy says.

“I'd still like to go with you,” Steve echoes. “Even if it's just for you to show me California.”

And that's not helpful at all. But then again, maybe it's more realistic than Billy's perfect fantasy. Maybe it's the better, healthier approach.

It's *something*.

“Okay,” Billy says, still feeling as unmoored as before.

“Okay,” Steve breathes. “Are you-- are you still mad at me?”

“No,” Billy says.

He's not sure if he ever *was* mad at Steve. Frustrated, maybe. Hurt, too. Mad at himself, definitely.

“I'm not mad. I wasn't mad.”

In for a penny, Billy thinks.

Steve lets out a shuddering breath, but nods. Carefully, he slides a hand over Billy's forearm, then to his wrist, and curls his fingers there.

“What were you then?” Steve asks. “If you weren't mad?”

“Frustrated,” Billy says. “Annoyed. Scared.” He swallows. “And hurt, I guess.”

He doesn't really *want* to talk about it. He wants to erase it, to forget it ever happened. Ever since Max asked if they broke up, if Steve dumped him or if Billy dumped Steve, the whole thing has eaten him up inside. More so than before, even.

Steve squeezes at his wrist. “I didn't want to hurt you.”

“It's not your fault,” Billy says. Because it's true.

“It is,” Steve finally looks up at him. “I made you think I didn't trust you.”

“It's unfair for me to ask you to trust me with everything,” Billy says. “We've known each other for a long time, but we haven't been dating that long. Hell, we didn't even keep in touch. I wouldn't trust me either.”

Steve lets out a short, sharp breath and nods. Then, he laughs and pulls back, elbows on his knees, face in his hands.

“I wish you'd said that before,” Steve confesses to his palms.

Me too, he thinks.

“Yeah, well,” Billy says. “I didn't.”

Steve lets out a sound like a laugh. Like a sob.

Then he sits up, stands up, and moves toward his closet. The line of his shoulders is tight. The scars on his back stand out horribly on his flush skin.

He drops his towel and pulls on a pair of sweats. He's the only person Billy’s ever met who hangs sweatpants.

“I'm -- not good at talking.” Billy says. “I'm sorry. Jesus, *fuck*, I'm sorry about a lot of things, but I'm *really* sorry about that.” He sighs. “We should've started talking about this forever ago.”

But Billy had been *scared.*

“Yeah, well, we *didn't,*” Steve says and turns back to him, arms over his chest again, and it's so quiet between them. “So, we have to start now.”

Billy can't help but bristle a little, shoulders squaring up as his posture mirrors Steve's.

“I don't know what you want me to say. I was *wrong,*” Billy says. “I was wrong and it was stupid and I had this *dumb fucking fantasy* --” he stops, voice breaking a little.

“Tell me that, then.” Steve says. “Tell me what you wanted.”

Billy grits his teeth together.

“Just you,” Billy says. “Ugh, just fucking -- I don't know. Happily ever after, or *whatever*. Just you. You're all I've ever wanted and I wanted it to be perfect. I wanted you to be *happy*. I wanted -- normal, or whatever.”

“And, what?” Steve's voice wobbles. “You don't think I wanted that, too? That I haven't spent the last five years wishing I'd followed you?”

Billy makes a noise like a hurt animal. Involuntary. Pained.

“Look, I know we can't have normal, for -- so many fucking reasons. But,” Billy says. “I'm willing to *try*.”

“There are things I'm not going to want to tell you. There are things I'm not going to want to share, at first, because they hurt too much to think about. I might not *ever*.” Steve says. “And we'll be right here again, with you thinking I don't trust you. With you telling me that I don't *love you*. You still willing to try?”

Billy takes a breath. “Look, I know that wasn't fair of me to say. I shouldn't have asked that of you. But it just --” he pauses, regroups. “Love looks different for the two of us. And it took me a while to understand that.”

“Love looks *different*?” Steve scoffs. “Do you-- do you think I love you or not, Billy? Because if you don't-- I can't fight with that. I don't know how to *fix* that. What more do I have to offer you--?”

“Jesus, I don't *mean* it like that,” Billy says, trying not to snarl, not to feel defensive. “I'm not saying you don't, Steve. I'm saying the fucking opposite of that.”

“So you think I love you,” Steve says.

“Oh my god,” Billy says, pushing up from the bed, because he has to move. Because he's starting to feel trapped. He can't keep the frustration out of his voice, or the hurt. “Is there even a right answer

to that? You told me you do, so you do. I don't know, though, is that putting words in your mouth?"

"No," Steve says. "I don't lie. I said it and I meant it. I mean it. I just need you to *know* that. Do you? Do you get it, Billy?"

"Sure, I know that," Billy says.

And yeah, he does trust Steve, does believe him -- but he's so keyed up that it's hard to express just how he feels.

And Steve stares at him for a moment. He lets out a short breath and falters forward.

"Do you?"

"Yes," Billy says, after a moment. After a pause where he can only hear his heart beating loudly in his ears.

"Okay," Steve says; careful, slow, looking a little lost. "Okay."

"Do you know that *I* love you?" Billy asks, feeling strange, just standing in the middle of Steve's room.

Steve's breath catches and his lips press thin and that's-- that's *awful.*

But he nods and forces a smile. "I hope so."

"Yeah, that's not incredibly encouraging."

Billy's chest aches. Because even with all his time in California, even with as much as he's grown, he knows he's got some shit to work on. Some shit that has no place in a relationship -- like apparently an ability to be so *shitty* at communicating that Steve doesn't believe that Billy loves him.

"I love you so fucking much," Billy says. He tries to convey just how much he means it, but all he really gets is his voice breaking, again.

His chest feels tight and his fists clench at his side's and he feels *something*, trying to swallow down the roughness in his throat.

Carefully, slowly, Steve steps forward. His hands go to Billy's, eyes big and sad and tired, and his touch is a balm. When Billy doesn't pull away, Steve leans in. Rests his forehead to Billy's brow.

“How much?” he asks, squeezing at the fingers balled at Billy's sides, trying to soothe him the way he always tries to soothe him-- with touch and affection and understanding.

Billy makes a noise in his throat.

“That's not fair,” Billy says. But quickly follows it with: “So fucking much.” His voice sounds rough as shit and painful to his own ears. “I'd stay here for you. I'd fucking -- move back in with my *dad*, if I had to.”

He doesn't say *I'd give my life for you,* but he thinks it, too.

“I wouldn't ever let you do that,” Steve says, shaking his head, their noses bumping. “Not any of that. I'd never ask you to. I'd never *need* you to.”

Billy finally reaches out, interlocking their fingers. He breaks and buries his face in Steve's neck, trying not to fall like he's dead weight. “But I *would*. I'd do anything for you and I don't think, I don't think you *get* that because I'm so fucking shitty at *telling* you that.”

Steve guides his hands. Coaxes Billy into wrapping his arms around his waist before draping his own over Billy's shoulders, tucking him closer.

“You just did,” Steve says, mouth pressed to his hair, nose buried in wet curls. “Better late than never.”

“Fuck,” Billy says, arms wrapping tight around Steve. Like if he lets go, they'll both drown. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry, baby.”

“Billy,” Steve sighs, and instead of saying *it's not your fault*, he kisses his head. “It's okay. I love you.”

A choke rips from Billy's throat, unbidden. He pulls Steve tight, ignores the way his eyes sting, and says: “I thought I lost you.”

“Never,” Steve promises. “I didn't stop loving you back then. I haven't stopped loving you, now.”

“That's probably stupid,” Billy says, voice mumbled from where he's got his face pressed up against Steve's neck.

Eventually, though, he pulls back and drags his hands over his cheeks, trying to wipe away any of the wetness there.

“*Fuck*, sorry,” Billy says, trying to swallow down the lump in his throat.

It's been forever since he cried. Of course it had to happen *now*.

Steve takes his face between his hands. “Don't apologize.”

Billy knows his eyes are red, *knows* he looks fucking ridiculous and Steve's just being kind.

“Baby,” Billy says.

“Don't,” Steve presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “You never have to apologize for tears.”

Billy just grunts, then tries to take a shaky breath. Because he's *always* had to apologize for tears. He's never *not*.

“God, if we had just *talked*,” Billy says. “I'm sorry I was so scared to.”

“Me too,” Steve says, pulling back to give him a tight smile. “I'm sorry I'm always so scared.”

“Pretty sure your thing is way more reasonable to be scared about,” Billy says.

He can't really stand the thought of Steve pulling all the way back, so Billy reaches out, fingers carefully folding over Steve's hips on either side. Where the sweatpants meet skin.

“I told you not to thank me,” Steve says, grin a bit more genuine. “Those tunnels terrify me.”

“I mean, they're pretty fucking terrifying,” and Billy's never even seen the monsters that used to live in them. “But I'm still thankful you shared it with me.”

“Don't--" Steve shudders and shuffles closer. “I hate it. I *hate it*, but--but you're right, I can't make that decision for you, but I hate it, okay?”

“Okay,” Billy says, moving to wrap his arms around Steve. “Okay, baby.”

“I hate the idea of you having to see them, face them, *fight* them.” Steve says, pressing his face to Billy's shoulder, clutching at his shirt. “*I hate it.*”

“I know,” Billy says. “And it means so much that you'd show me. It does.”

He runs his palms down Steve's spine. Steve trembles under that touch and lets out a soft sound, still clinging to him.

Then, carefully, he pulls back. Not away, not out of the circle of Billy's arms, but back. Dragging his cheek against Billy's. Then his mouth.

“I don't--" Steve's voice breaks under the weight of the day and of the relief of their resolution. “Don't let me think about it. Distract me. Please?”

“Yeah,” Billy says. And it feels kind of like a white flag, kind of like both of them surrendering all at once.

So Billy kisses him, walks Steve backward until his legs hit the bed. He pushes until Steve topples backwards and Billy follows not a split second later, crowding in on top of Steve, kissing him deep, hands everywhere.

Steve arches for his touch. Gasps into his mouth. Draws his hands down Billy's back and tugs at the hem of his shirt.

Wanting in a way he isn't usually. Billy can almost taste the saccharine flavor of *need* on his tongue as they kiss.

He loses his shirt at the first tug. He slips it off over his head and throws it to the ground, groaning as he leans down, bare chest against Steve's. It feels so good, getting skin on skin contact again. Getting to be so close.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Billy says, lips moving from Steve's mouth to his cheek to his jaw. Then, down to his neck. "So gorgeous."

Steve's hands are warm, *worshipful* up and over his sides. Tracing muscle under tan skin, blind but reverent as his head lulls back against the sheets. As he hitches out a low sound, wraps his legs around Billy's hips, and tugs him flush.

"Missed you," Steve breathes. "Missed you so bad."

"Missed you too," Billy says, in between peppering Steve's skin with kisses.

Billy can't help the way he presses Steve down against the bed, seeking *more*. He rolls his hips, gasping out warm air against Steve's neck. But this isn't about him, he reminds himself -- it's about *Steve*. So Billy pulls back, after sucking a bruise against Steve's collarbone.

"What do you want, baby?" Billy asks.

Steve's smile is a dopey thing. "You."

Billy kisses the smile right off his face.

"Well you've got me," Billy says, when he finally pulls back, lips red and a little out of breath. "Can I blow you?" Billy asks, wanting that. Wanting more.

"You never need to ask," Steve groans, tugging him down for another kiss. "But only if you fuck me after."

Billy hums, rolling his hips down just so that he can appreciate how hard Steve is in his sweats. Billy flushes slightly, feeling a little like he's on fire.

"Can I eat you out?" Billy asks. "After I blow you?"

“Jesus,” Steve hisses, fingers digging in at his shoulders, thighs tightening at his hips. “*Yes*.”

“Great,” Billy says. Then, he bites down on Steve’s neck. “But you’re not allowed to come until I’m inside you. Wanna feel it.”

Steve chokes on a keen. His hips lurch and meet Billy's. They rut like that, for a second, and Steve nods haplessly.

“Yes,” Steve agrees, instantly, breathlessly. “Yes.”

Billy doesn’t need much more convincing than that -- not that he ever needed any to begin with, but he always wants Steve enthusiastic, always wants him panting out a *yes* or Billy’s name.

It doesn’t take much effort to haul Steve further back on the bed. Billy kisses him once more and then slides down him, until he’s nestled in between Steve’s legs where he loves to be, palming the tenting fabric of Steve’s cock, rubbing with his fingers and then leaning in to nose it, too. To get Steve moaning before Billy’s even touched bare skin.

He loves Steve like this, the way he gets so needy, so breathy. Billy loves the way he can rile Steve up so easily, just by knowing him so well.

“Tell me to touch you, baby,” Billy says. “Tell me you want my mouth on you.”

Which is not *entirely* fair, considering the next thing Billy does is to mouth at Steve through the sweatpants themselves.

Steve jerks, gasping out, hands fluttering for purchase. Long, deft fingers find his hair and the sheets. They fist, as he rocks, and then relax as he mutters a breathy *fuck* to himself at the teasing heat of Billy's mouth. At the wet patch he leaves there in the worn cotton.

But better-- Steve's knees fall open, legs sprawling wide. Surrendering up to whatever Billy might give him. Whatever he might tease out of him.

“Your mouth,” Steve hisses, nails savage against his scalp. “I want

your mouth on my cock."

Steve tugs, a little insistent, and that's all that Billy needs to dip his thumbs under the waistband of Steve's pants and pull them down his thighs and then just off completely. There's something about having Steve spread out underneath him, naked and whining for him, that Billy *loves*. He's so vulnerable like this, and he *trusts* Billy, which is more than he ever expected Steve to give him.

Steve's cock is soft and hot when Billy wraps his fingers around him. He gives a couple tugs before he can't wait any longer and slips Steve's head between his lips, salivating for a taste.

Curling up, muscles jumping, Steve sucks in a rasping breath. He shudders back down, and Billy can feel his cock fill out against his tongue. Can taste his arousal, and it's completely, overwhelmingly sensational.

"*Billy*," Steve says, and it sounds like *please*, and it's the best thing Billy's heard in ages.

But Billy isn't *nice*. California has only made him so kind.

And Steve wanted a distraction.

So Billy goes *slow*. Distractingly slow, taking his time with Steve, savoring the weight of him in his mouth, the way he presses down on Billy's tongue.

Steve's breath goes shallow. Dips soft and short and *hot* as Billy draws pleasure out of him. He flexes his hips, to try to take more, to urge Billy faster, and tugs at his hair with a whine he tries to swallow back.

But the way he shudders when Billy takes his hips and presses him *down*, the way he *moans*, wanton and wanting, tells him Steve *needs* it like this. Needs it to drag out until there's nothing left but desire in his head. Nothing but *Billy*.

And Billy has no problem taking his time. No problem pulling off when Steve's moans get a little too loud, tongue swirling around the sensitive head of Steve's cock before gradually dipping back down,

taking him back into his mouth until he hits the back of Billy’s throat.

Billy presses down, digs his thumbs in at Steve’s hips, and swallows around him. Holds Steve steady until he has to come up for air, until Steve’s hips are jerking a little no matter how hard Billy tries to hold him down.

Steve's twitching and beautiful when he finally eases off again. On the brink and squirming, body chasing the bliss Billy keeps offering. His skin has taken on a different kind of flush, cheeks rosy and lips bitten red, and when Billy meets his eyes, they're so *dark*. Staring down, *watching*, like he's just as hungry.

When Billy licks at the precome sliding down his length, Steve groans something guttural and inaudible. His eyes squeeze shut and he arches long and slow and lovely.

“You're leaking for me,” Billy says.

He runs his tongue over the tip of Steve's cock again, flat and slow, pulling back just a bit so that the liquid pulls thin in a line between Steve's head and Billy's tongue.

It's so fucking hot. Billy's *aching* in his pants, and he's not even anywhere close to done breaking Steve apart.

“*Fuck,”* the word fractures in Steve's mouth, and Billy thinks one right touch would be all it took to shatter him completely. “*Please*. Billy, *please.”*

Billy's got no idea what Steve is asking for, but Billy knows how to get him to say it again. It doesn't take much effort to pull back -- and then to flip Steve over. Billy drags his hips up and off the bed -- partially to give himself a better angle, and partially so that Steve *can't* grind his dick against the bed.

His skin is smooth and soft, dotted with moles. Billy bites down on one of his cheeks, pressing an open mouthed kiss to where his teeth land.

Steve grunts, resting his forehead to the bed, elbows by his ears, fingers fisted into the plush softness of a pillow somewhere over his

head. He spreads his knees, *offering* himself in a way he hadn't when he was younger and more inexperienced, when he'd balked at the suggestion before Billy had swayed him with a wicked tongue.

It's blind and it's trusting and it's beautiful. Steve is beautiful, all pale skin, muscles bunching in his back and in his thighs. Trembling a little. Cock heavy between his legs.

“Yes, yes, *please*, yes.” Steve breathes.

Billy doesn't wait. He's not cruel. And Steve looks so pretty and so delicious under him.

Palms wide, Billy spreads Steve out and licks over him. First, breath hot, then his tongue following moments after. He's slow with it, tonguing over the heat of Steve, the seam of him.

Steve's toes curl. He jerks as a shudder ripples up through him, and pants heavy and wet against the bed.

Billy wonders if he could make him come, just like this. But it's a thought for another time.

Billy's tongue traces along the seam of him, before focusing in on his center. It's hard *not* to, really, with all of the little noises Steve makes, with the way his hips jerk under Billy. He wants to feel more, so he holds Steve in by his thighs, pulling him up a little with his hips so Billy's tongue can circle, and then press in deep.

Steve's spine curves downward. A lovely arc, his hips angled up, and as Billy works him over, his breath becomes strained with notes of keening pleasure, with languid moans. His thighs quiver under Billy's hands.

Billy pulls back, bites the flesh of Steve's ass. A warning.

“Tell me if you're getting close. Don't want you to come, yet,” Billy says.

Billy's tongue laps, Steve groans. Calloused fingertips dig into skin.

Steve huffs out a whine, choking on it. He rocks with it, fingers

flexing out and curling tight again.

“You're so fuckin’--" Steve gasps, and Billy can feel him twitch tight, can hear him *whimper*. “How are you so-- *god,* what are you doing to me?”

Billy can't help himself. With a grin, he sucks a finger into his mouth, gets it nice and slick, and then begins pressing it in alongside his tongue. Opening Steve up for him. Taking more. Working more sounds out of him, slow and easy and greedy, too.

The long, drawn out whine Steve gives is muffled. He presses his face into the sheets, hiding there. Panting there. Little tremors shake along his arms and legs.

Still, Billy can hear, when his voice pitches to a desperate note. To the way he says his name like a warning, over and over, as Billy keeps him at that edge.

Billy knows Steve’s body well enough to know when to slow down, when to not move his finger at all and instead just lap around it, at the puckered ring of muscle surrounding him. It's terrifically hot, the way that Steve clenches around him.

“Baby,” Billy says, after a moment of stillness, two spit-slick fingers pressing into Steve slowly. Just breaching him. “You're *so fucking hot*.”

Steve grunts, face turning to press his cheek to the bed, mouth hanging open as he tries to catch his breath. His eyes are dazed and a little wet, pupils blown out wide.

“C'mon,” he says, voice gone, and he rocks back to meet Billy's fingers, moaning and absolutely careless in seeking more pleasure; gone to it, burning for it. “C'mon, Billy, *please*.”

Billy loves Steve's tightness around his fingers, loves the way it makes Steve groan. But he can't work Steve open this way, not the way he wants to, to leave Steve loose and wet and pleading for him.

“Pass me the lube, baby,” Billy says before leaning down and lapping over Steve once more, indulgent.

For a second, Steve doesn't move. He eases a little, with relief, and tries to catch his breath.

Then, he fumbles to the side, reaching for the nightstand. He pulls the lube out and passes it over.

Billy hums his thanks, pulling his fingers back and replacing them with just his tongue for a little while, content to get Steve squirming again.

When he is, Billy gets his fingers slick and easily works two in, sucking in a breath with the way Steve takes them, the way his body swallows Billy's digits whole.

“So hot,” Billy murmurs, twisting his fingers until Steve keens.

Steve's breath is coming shorter and shorter. The pleas he whispers, the way he begs, is hushed and sweet and so, so desperate.

Billy slicks him up slow and spreads him easy. Until he's drawn tight like a bow, until he's saying *Billy, don't stop*, and then he's pulling away to add more slick and Steve *sobs* as ecstasy is ripped from him again.

“Please, I need--" Steve's voice wobbles. “I need you. *Please*.”

“If I fuck you now,” Billy warns, “you're gonna be so tight. Don't wanna hurt you.”

But Billy also doesn't say *no*.

Steve sobs again, tugging at the sheets. He's strung out, flush, sweating. His cock is red and weeping between his legs.

“I don't-- don't *care*,” Steve says. “*I need you*.”

Billy can barely *breathe*.

“Okay,” he says, trying to ignore just how hard he is, how much he *needs*, too, and focuses on Steve. “I got you, baby,” Billy says, slicking up his own cock with lube.

He even pours some over Steve's hole before lining himself up, before slowly pressing his way in.

Steve's *tight*. Burning hot and wet and *perfect.* He keens as Billy eases in, fluttering impossibly tighter, before taking a hitching breath and forcing himself to relax.

He hisses as Billy inches deeper. When Billy stalls, Steve reaches back, hand groping for his hip to urge him forward. He even arches, trembling, and presses back to meet him. Trying to take him in more. Trying to impale himself back.

Billy won't let him go too fast, hands impossibly steady from where they're gripping Steve's hips, tight. If he holds Steve any looser, he knows his hands will shake, will tremble. It's so *much.* To some extent, Billy thought he might never get this again, might never get to be this close to Steve again.

Carefully, with so much reverence, Billy fully seats himself in Steve. He feels himself completely taken in by Steve's heat.

Billy can't help but groan and let out a shaky breath, unmoving as he allows Steve's body to get used to it. As he allows himself to not fall apart at the sensation.

They stay like that, together, breathing and on the edge of shaking apart. Clinging to one another as they settle into the heat of sensation.

“Come on,” Steve breathes, propping himself onto his elbows, moaning as he ruts back. “Fuck me. Take me, Billy.”

Billy doesn't need to be told twice. He takes -- and he *gives*. Driving into Steve just so, hands pushing Steve's hips down a bit so that he gets the angle that makes Steve moan loudly, makes him nearly shout with each thrust.

“You're so good,” Billy pants. “So good.”

“Oh, *fuck*,” Steve gasps, sobs out his bliss, knees spreading to let him deeper. “*Ah,* fuck*, Billy*.”

Each inward thrust earns him a noise, dripping with pleasure, feeding the heat in Billy's gut as he moves. And Steve's been on the edge so long. Billy's kept him there so long, teased him to it, brought him back from it, that it isn't a surprise when he starts begging again.

“Let me-- *let me*, Billy.” Steve pants, fingers curling and uncurling in the bedding. “God, I wanna-- wanna come with you in me. Let me, please.”

Billy shudders, because the closer Steve gets the tighter he gets. And Billy, well, he wants, selfishly, to come at the same time.

And as much as he wants it to last forever, he knows it can't. Knows that today has been too much for both of them.

“Just -- a little longer, baby,” Billy promises, just *holding* Steve's cock as he fucks into him, faster and faster still.

Steve sobs again. Gasps each time Billy fucks into him. Claws at his arm with blunt nails as the bed groans beneath them, springs whining. He moves with him, meets him, cock twitching in his palm, straining as Billy holds him off.

“Please. *Please.*” Steve babbles, half out of his mind with sensation, clutching at Billy's forearm and fisting a hand in the sheets. “God, Billy. So good, please-- *please*, Billy.”

And that's all Billy needs, really. Just Steve, strung out and fucked out for Billy, pleading and whining and moaning beneath him.

He's *so close* now, just barely holding himself off.

“Come on, baby,” Billy says, fingers still wet with lube working over Steve's cock. “Let go. Come for me,” Billy begs.

He wants to feel it, wants to feel Steve break apart around him.

Steve nods. Clenching around him, shaking apart already, as he rides out the last of his control before shattering under Billy's attention.

He comes with a wail of a sound, Billy's name on his lips and tongue, spilling out over already ruined sheets as Billy slides into the spasm

of his body. Crying out as Billy bucks into him, orgasming wringing out of him until he can barely hold himself up.

Billy doesn't hold back, fucking into Steve hard until his own orgasm hits him, until his hips are stuttering and shaking against Steve. Billy can't help but fold himself over Steve, one arm holding him up, the other wrapping around Steve's mid-section to keep him up, too.

“Baby,” Billy says, panting, pressing kisses into the sweaty, hot skin of Steve's neck. “Fuck, I love you. I love you so much.”

His head is still foggy, still clouded with the pleasure that has yet to fully leave him. Beneath him, Steve doesn't seem to be faring much better. Still gasping, still spasming, still trembling.

He cranes his neck over. Offers space to Billy's mouth. Moans when he gets a hint of teeth.

“Love you,” he breathes, squeezing at Billy's arm around his waist. “Love feeling you like this.”

“Missed you so fucking much,” Billy says.

Slowly as he can bear, he slides himself out of Steve and wrestles him onto his back so that Billy can press him down into the mattress while kissing the living daylights out of him. Steve's fingers find their way to his hair, meeting his mouth with lazy, languid appreciation.

The desperation has bled from them, bones weighed by the echoes of pleasure. Still, Steve pulls Billy down fully onto himself, humming as Billy settles there.

“Missed you, too.” Steve kisses at his cheek, his jaw, hands sliding down his back, hooking a heel behind one of his knees to keep him close. “Fuckin’ hated it. House felt too big without you.”

Billy hums. “Bet it did. Missed sleeping next to you.” Billy crowds into his space, kissing his neck all over. Sloppy, messy. Way too goddamn sentimental.

Steve tilts his head back, offering up his throat for him. “Missed holding you. Missed your arms around me.”

“Dork,” Billy says, but he kisses Steve at that. Loses himself in the rush of it, the love.

“You love me,” Steve mumbles against his lips.

“I do,” Billy says. “I absolutely do.”

“And I love you,” Steve tells him, pressing his palm to Billy's cheek. “More than words can express.”

“I know,” Billy says, thinking of tunnels and monsters, of Steve's shaking hands. He thinks about the press of Steve's lips, and the way he pushed tears from Billy's cheeks. “I know, baby.”

“Okay,” Steve breathes, drawing him into another kiss. “Okay, good.”

And it is good, finally. It's *so good.*

-*-

The light of the early morning sun paints Steve in gold. Billy traces the long shadows with his fingers. Tracks them down Steve's spine as Steve watches him, eyes heavy, head pillowed on the fold of his arms. He follows them up to where jagged lines tear through Steve's shoulder. Hesitates.

Leans in and presses his mouth there.

They'd spent most of the afternoon, the evening, the middle of night reveling in having one another's touch again. In the relief of knowing it wasn't going anywhere. But hungry for it, for the reassurance of it, anyway.

“You're beautiful,” Billy says, against the phantom of fear and pain that still clings to Steve.

Steve hums, shifting a little, and then settling again as Billy drags the backs of his knuckles against the curve of Steve's spine. Beautiful and so *strong*. Bearing the weight of it all on this back, on these shoulders.

Billy's never felt comfortable being taken care of, being worried over, except for here. With Steve's big eyes on him. Never felt comfortable

being vulnerable, but for Steve.

He'd proved that during their long night again. Then again. Had taken his time working Billy up and bringing him down. Had given and taken in turn. Had held Billy just as tight as Billy clinged on to him.

“You're leaving today,” Steve says, voice still rough, and Billy kisses his throat.

“Yeah,” Billy says. “This afternoon.”

Steve sighs, turns, and lets Billy drag him under his weight. Goes softer beneath him.

“I can't leave with you,” Steve tells him, brow pinched, hands gentle on his face. “But I'll follow. Wherever you go, I'll follow.”

Billy frowns. He presses his nose down, drags it over Steve's neck.

“Baby, we can come back. Make a whole trip of it after we drop Max off,” Billy says.

Steve angles his head back for him. “I still have shifts I need to cover. I-- I didn't plan to go with you. I didn't know if you'd still want me to, so I didn't.”

And okay, it *kind of* just felt like Billy’s world stopped turning right there. Like the ground just shifted beneath him.

“Oh,” he says as he pulls back, feeling a little stupid, and a little something else, too. Sad, maybe. Scared, maybe, too.

Steve doesn't let him get too far. “I didn't want to get my hopes up. I didn't want to put it all in motion and then-- well.”

“Okay,” Billy says, swallowing.

Yeah, okay, he gets that. He does. It's smart.

But Billy has driven away from Hawkins before without Steve. He doesn't want to do it again.

It doesn't help that he can't shake the desperate feeling that Steve won't follow. That he'll change his mind and just -- stay.

"It'll be a few days. A week. Tops." Steve says.

Promises.

His thumbs are gentle over Billy's cheeks. His smile sad.

"I hate the idea of watching you go," he says. "But I can do it. Knowing that you'll be waiting for me when I follow."

Billy thinks of clearing out a set of drawers for Steve, of the possibility of never filling them. He knows he'll do it anyway, but it doesn't make the idea any less devastating.

"Are you sure you can't, not even for a few days? We could come back here for however long, you know."

Billy's not the type to grasp at straws, but. For Steve, anything.

Steve's lips press thin. "I-- I mean, it depends on how fast you could get us there. But I'd probably have to fly back as soon as we arrived. Then pack and drive across again. I mean-- I could do it. If that's what you need."

And that just makes Billy feel stupid. Makes him feel *crazy*. Because Steve told him he'll come, so he'll come -- right?

"No, it's alright," Billy says. "Besides, it'll give me and Max some time to hang out just the two of us, you know?"

Steve frowns. "I *want* to come with you. You know that, right?"

"I know," Billy says. And it's not a lie, it's *not*.

But he feels stretched thin anyways, anxious that it won't work out.

And he knows, to some extent, that most things *don't* work out, that it's dumb to put all his hopes on this one thing -- but it's all he's ever wanted. Just Steve. Just this. He knows he's lucky he got to be this close to Steve again, even if it all crashes and burns.

“It just sucked, leaving without you last time,” Billy says. “Don't really wanna do it again.”

Steve makes a soft sound. He brings Billy down, coaxes him into a kiss, and cards his fingers through messy curls.

“There's a diner,” he says. “Two towns over. Maybe a few hours drive. If we stop there for lunch and Max drives my car, I could leave with you and still come back to finish things here. That way you aren't leaving town without me. Not really.”

It seems so silly. So un-fucking-necessary.

“Okay,” Billy says anyway, folding into the kisses. Into the warmth of Steve's touch. “Okay.”

Steve hums, spreading his kisses along his cheek and jaw. “I'm not letting you get away again.”

“You better not,” Billy says. Then, his face breaks out into a grin. “You gonna buy us some cherry pie?”

Steve smiles. “Wouldn't be right not to.”

At least, Billy thinks, his last kiss with Steve in Hawkins will have the right flavor.

-*-

The diner two towns over is a cute, ancient thing. It's like time came to stop here, freezing everything in a glimpse into an era before them. They even still have a jukebox that plays *records* in the corner.

Max hasn't caught up with them, yet. Billy thinks she's taking her time on purpose. Dawdling to give them more moments together, alone.

Steve sits in the booth right next to him, instead of across from him. Curls in and tucks close. Clutches at Billy's hand like he's worried he'll disappear.

Billy kind of wishes he and Steve could stay right here, in this old

diner, and freeze in time too.

“How long?” Billy asks, even though he’s heard it before. Like, if he asks enough times, he can solidify it into reality. “How long until you can leave?”

How long until you’re at my side again? Billy thinks.

How long do I have to wait for you?

Which isn’t entirely fair, because it’s not like Steve hasn’t done his fair share of waiting, too.

“I have to finish my shifts this week,” Steve says, thumb stroking over Billy's hand, eyes on the knots of their fingers. “Pack up. Arrange for someone to come take care of the house, the lawn, the pool once a week. But then. After that. Then I'll come to you.”

“Okay,” Billy says. Because it’s all he can.

Two weeks, give or take. He can *do* that.

He can.

Billy orders them both milkshakes with extra cherries. Steve hides a smile against his shoulder.

“You'll probably forget all about missing me once you get home,” Steve says.

Billy laughs and pulls Steve’s hand into his lap so that he can hold it with both hands.

“Yeah, that’s un-fucking-likely,” he says.

“Nah, you will.” Steve says. “You'll be too busy to miss me. Catching up with work, with friends. Bet you won't even notice I'm not there.”

“Sure, pretty boy. I’ll forget all about missing you. Definitely.”

Soon, there are milkshakes in front of them and Billy’s holding up a cherry by the stem, dangling it in front of Steve’s face.

“Want my cherry?” Billy asks, smile a little crooked, momentarily transported back years ago, to a fluorescent diner, to taking Steve’s cherry and offering Steve his own non-existent one.

Steve smiles, eyes bright, laugh catching in his throat. “Only if you take mine.”

“Always,” Billy says.

When he opens his mouth, Steve places the cherry softly on his tongue. It’s sweet and sugary, and it tastes a little bit like a first kiss. A future together. *Hope*.

-*-

California is just as Billy remembers it.

Billy's not been gone long enough, this time, for much to change at all. The only difference is that the old lady downstairs, Mrs. Garza, has a cat now. It keeps Billy up at night, sometimes, creeping up the fireplace and meowing at his window.

The ride in was easy. Max was a great passenger, didn't even complain about his music once, but--

But she would give him these little knowing looks. Glance at him when she thought he was too busy minding the road, and it drove him a little crazy halfway through Nevada.

The second they hit California soils, though, they both relaxed. They both were *home*. A feeling so comforting he can feel it in his bones.

It sticks with Billy until he’s all ready for Steve to get there. Closets and cupboards cleaned out to make space for another body. Hell, Billy had even gone to the trouble of picking up another dresser for Steve, one someone had painted cherry red years ago. Billy sands most of the paint off on one of his weekends, so just a hint of the color shows through. He places it next to his own dresser, sticks a photo of the two of them, smiling with ice cream, in a thrifted frame on top.

And he waits.

And waits.

And sure, he *could* call Steve, could ask when he's leaving, when he's all ready, but that feels strangely like jinxing it. Like pulling out the most important thread.

So he waits.

-*-

It's a day at the end of August. It's hot, like it always is this time of year, and it was a long day at the shop trying to get everything back in order, only cut by the salty breeze rolling in off the tide.

He spends most of it under the chassis of a beat up beetle, trying to change the oil and check the brakes, and it keeps his hands busy. His head busy. It's nice, after so long being idle.

When he gets home, he's sweaty and covered in grease, and he thinks he might be seeing things when he walks up to his place and Steve Harrington is sitting on his doorstep. Mrs. Garza's cat is purring up a storm between his calves and he's stroking the curve of his spine with a grin, hair in his face where his sunglasses aren't holding it back, and he hasn't even seen Billy.

Looks more like wishful thinking, or a mirage, than like he's actually there.

"Steve?" Billy says, a little afraid that he's going to break the trance, the moment, by saying anything -- but he has to be sure.

Steve jerks, looking up sharp, and he pushes to his feet in an awkward little rush. "Hey. I-- I wanted to surprise you and I know you told me where the spare key was, but I wasn't sure if I should--"

"No, it's --" Billy says, feet taking him forward even though he feels kind of struck dumb, "-- it's perfect. I'm so glad. So fucking *glad* you're here."

Billy closes the distance between the two of them, uncaring that he's in his work clothes and covered in oil and grease. He wraps his arms around Steve, tight, and buries his face in Steve's neck.

Steve goes easy, instantly, against him. He wraps Billy up in his arms and sighs his relief.

“Me too,” he says. “I *missed* you.”

It feels perfect, Billy thinks. Steve, in his arms, in front of the place he lives.

Billy pulls back, takes Steve’s head in his hands, and presses in until Steve’s breath is hot against his lips. He savors it a moment before slowly leaning in and kissing Steve. Like he’s wanted to do for weeks.

Hell, like he’s wanted to do for *years*. He’s kissing Steve, soft and sweet, in front of his home, in the middle of the street. Like he’d been so afraid to do, so many years before.

“For a second, I thought you were a dream,” Billy says.

Steve huffs out a laugh, leaning back to squint at him, and Billy loves him-- he loves him-- he *loves him*.

“Don't cream your pants, sweetheart.”

Billy laughs, taking Steve's face between his hands and kissing him again.

Steve hums, smiling against his mouth as one kiss bleeds into two. Steve's hands go for his hips, squeezing, and he stands there with Billy in the California sunshine, kissing him hello.